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No. 330.

\$2.50
a Year.

Published Weekly by Beadle and Adams,
No. 98 WILLIAM ST., NEW YORK.

Price,
Five Cents.

Vol. XXVI.



KIT GAVE THE POET A KICK IN THE STOMACH THAT DOUBLED HIM UP LIKE A JACK-KNIFE,
AND CAUSED HIM TO HOWL WITH PAIN.

The Denver Sport's Racket;

OR,

KIT'S BIG BOOM.

BY E. L. WHEELER,
AUTHOR OF "DEADWOOD DICK" NOVELS,
"ROSEBUD ROB" NOVELS, ETC., ETC.

CHAPTER I. A TRAGEDY—ALMOST.

PLAYED-OUT!

A suggestive title, speaking volumes for many a poor gold-seeker, who had come, and gone.

The place was not a modern Eldorado, nor had it ever been. The report of the discovery of gold had drawn hither a horde of humanity, such as ever follows up mining strikes, and as a majority, they got badly "left."

The small deposits of pay dirt on the gulch-bottom were not sufficient to last long enough to pay for the pains of putting up more than a few habitations; consequently, the large share of the horde stampeded for Thunderville, another characteristic and more populous and successful camp, ten miles up the gulch.

Of course a few sanguine souls remained at Played-Out, or else Played-Out wouldn't have been in existence, at the time of our story.

A few shanties and cabins had been built for the use of those who did remain, and, a supply-store, post-office and saloon made up the balance of the structures—the saloon, as a matter of course, being the most pretentious and paying establishment in the town.

Played-Out was literally ruled by one individual—Lawton Leech, Esq., gentleman of leisure, who had come to the camp when it was in its infancy, and having more "tin" than any of the toilers of the pick and pan, had laid back on his oars, so to speak, and watched his opportunity.

When, one by one, the miners began to shoulder their tools, to seek a more profitable camp, Leech came forward and made them a trifling offer, for the claims they were about to abandon, and in the majority of cases they were only too glad to accept it.

The best of the territory at Played-Out, however—and it was voted bad enough—Lawton Leech could not add to his little monopoly. It comprised about twenty acres, and belonged to an old Frenchman, named Roth Roulere—a drunken old vagabond, who never did a day's work, and whose only motive in life seemed to be that of guzzling all the whisky he could get.

If he had no money, which was usually the case, he had a happy faculty of "ringing-in" a drink at some one else's expense.

His cabin stood upon his own claim, while all the others were located upon the claims of Leech.

His cabin was presided over by a young maiden, scarce more than seventeen, whom old Roulere declared to be his daughter.

That she was nothing of the kind, was the current belief in Played-Out; but no one knew

for a positive fact whether she was or was not his child.

She was a most charming appearing girl, and of winning disposition. Her figure, though rather *petite*, was well rounded, and her features were cast in nature's happiest mold. Her hair bordered upon a sunny color, and her eyes were brown and sparkling in their expression.

Few men were there in Played-Out who did not worship her, and Lawton Leech was one who aspired to winning her for his wife.

Mai, as she was called, despised Leech heartily, and made no effort to conceal the fact, while her dislike of him seemed to only make him the more determined to win her.

He also took extra pains to get old Roulere into his control as much as possible, but the old fellow was too shrewd to give Leech a chance at his property, which was the schemer's main object.

Several magnificent offers had the old vagabond received from Leech, but each one had been positively refused. And, although old Roulere had the claim, he had no money, and to keep the wolf from the door, sweet Mai had to contrive in different ways to earn an honest penny.

She occasionally got a job of sewing to do, and at nights, with her banjo, appeared upon the little stage at one end of the only saloon in the camp, known as Tim Flannigan's Shebang, where she played and sung to the crowd of miners, with whom she was a prime favorite.

Rude and reckless, though these men of Played-Out were—and it had been hinted that there were those among them who would not scruple at any deed to gain money—they were at least men enough to treat Mai with respect and not to allow an insult to be offered to her by any one.

Of course it was distasteful to the poor girl to cater to half-civilized and half-drunken men, but she well knew it was a case of bread and butter or starvation, as Roulere never thought of furnishing the wherewithall for subsistence.

On one dark, stormy night in October, when a fierce wind drove chilling blasts of rain through the gulch, from the north, Played-Out was thrown into a state of commotion which was certainly a rare thing, the stage, which never stopped longer than to drop a scantily-filled mail-pouch, actually let off two passengers.

The fact was heralded to those inside of Tim Flannigan's, by Grizzly Jim, who had come out to "throw up" a portion of the vile liquor he had imbibed.

One of the passengers was a tall young man, dressed in black broadcloth, and having a ministerial aspect. His face was as smooth as a boy's, and rather pale, while his angularity of features seemed to indicate that he had passed his twenty-eighth or ninth year.

He carried no baggage and seemed to have no certain object in view, as, after glancing about for a moment, he turned and entered Flannigan's Shebang.

The other party who alighted from the stage, was what is known in vernacular Westernism, as a "holy terror."

He was a man about six feet tall, and powerfully proportioned in limb, broadness of shoulders and massiveness of chest. His face was large while its expression was all that spoke of evil cunning and brutal ferocity.

A brigandish black mustache ornamented his lip, and his long matted hair was of the same hue. A greasy slouch hat, riddled with bullet-holes, was cocked upon one side of his head, with the evident intent of adding to his rowdy appearance.

Then he wore a flaring red-flannel shirt, opened at the throat, and a pair of trowsers, mud splashed and greasy, were met by a pair of knee-boots. A leather belt about his waist, contained no less than half a dozen revolvers, and two enormous bowie-knives; so that the new-comer might have been set down as "a bad man to tackle."

He followed the first passenger into the saloon, as Played-Out offered no other congenial place of resort, except the grocery store and post-office, at which place it was altogether too dry for the ordinary pilgrim.

Flannigan's place was a one-story shanty, with one main apartment, thirty by fifty feet, and a couple of rear rooms of smaller dimensions.

The main room was fitted up with a rude bar, near the front, following which were a number of card-tables and chairs.

At the rear end of the room, was a small uncurtained stage, with a door opening off of it, into the back room.

There were maybe a score or more of roughly-dressed pilgrims in the place, when the two strangers entered.

They gave the new arrivals a keen scrutiny, for it was a matter of wonderment to them what two more men could want or find to do in Played-Out.

The tall young man in black walked up to the bar, threw down a gold-piece, and briefly said: "Come, gents—join me!"

The glasses were filled, lifted, bunched.

An instant later there was the sharp report of a pistol, and the glasses were dashed to atoms in the hands of those who were about to drink to the stranger's health.

Had a thunderbolt burst through their midst it could scarcely have created greater surprise. It took but a glance to discover the author of the mischief so unexpectedly perpetrated.

It was the brigandish-looking individual that had just arrived on the stage. He stood leaning against the door-post, within the saloon, a leering grin upon his ugly face, and a smoking revolver in his grasp.

The man in black uttered an exclamation of anger, and stepped toward the door, with flashing eyes.

"Confound your impudence—what do you mean?" he cried, sternly. "Explain yourself."

"Guess you forgot something didn't ye, me bloomin' bananner?" was the answer. "Ye fer-gitted ter ax Big Blacksnake, ther Bouncer, ter wet his whistle, didn't yer?"

"No, sir, I did not. I did not take notice of you when I invited these gents to imbibe, and if I had, I am not so sure I should have asked you up!"

"Ye wouldn't hey?"

"I think not."

"Why?"

A greenish glitter was creeping into the ruffian's eyes.

"Because I don't like the looks of you."

"Ye don't?"

"You heard me speak."

"Ye don't likes ther looks ov me?"

"I do not."

"Why?"

"Because if you want to know, you are a ruffian, or at least look it—beneath the notice of any respectable party."

As cool as a cucumber, so to speak, was the chap in black. He did not seem to be in the least awed by the ferocious aspect of the tough.

And the miners looked on in amazement, expecting every minute to see the daring fellow shot down.

As for Big Blacksnake, so he had announced himself, he appeared to be delaying the culmination of matters for the sole purpose of working himself into a first-class passion.

"I guess ye don't know me," he leered, evilly.

"If I did, I should want an emetic."

"You'll git one, cuss yer picture, afore I'm through with ye!"

"You only think so."

"I know so. I'm a blood-puddiu', I am, an' I don't take no slights ner sass from nobody—ye heer that?"

"Oh! yes."

"Waal, I mean it!"

"Do you, really? Now, look you here; let me give you a little pointer, and give it to you straight. You came here calculating to scare some one, eh?"

"I ginerally skeer 'em inter fits when I winds myself up an' sets myself a-goin'!" Blacksnake declared.

"Then please impress it on your memory that you can scare no one here—that is, you can't scare me, and I speak for a dozen when I speak for myself. Now, then, you overgrown bull-whack, if you know which side your bun is buttered on, you will confer a favor upon yourself by taking a gentle skip!"

"Cuss my boots! What, I skip?"

"You heard me—you skip!"

"When I do, I hope wolves may gnaw me an' buzzards eat my eyes out! Ther idea o' me skippin', 'ca'se a little banty like you sez so! Say! d'ye want I should put a chunk o' plum-bago right inter yer noddle?"

"Oh, no; I couldn't permit you to do *that*. In fact, you talk utter nonsense. How in the world do you suppose you could shoot me?"

"Wi' this hyer tool, w'ot kills at forty rod!"

"I doubt that—in fact, I doubt if you could hit a whisky-glass at the other end of the room. Dash my skin! if I don't set 'em up all around fer every time you'll do it from now till mornin'."

"Ye tork like ye was well 'beeled!"

"Course I am! Never sport around 'cept I carry fifty hundred or so in my pocket."

"Bah! ye lie! Say, durn ye—I see w'ot you're drivin' at. Ye wanter get me off my mad, so I won't mop up ther floor with ye. That's whaf

you're arter, ye white-livered skunk. I'm jest goin' ter swipe ev'ry speck o' dirt off'm this hyer floor wi' yer puny carcass!"

His notion of pistol-fighting was evidently at an end, for thrusting his revolver into his belt, he made a ferocious spring toward the stranger, intent on grappling with him.

Never an inch did the stranger move, but at the right minute, he raised his left fist, and caught Blacksnake upon the neck, beneath the chin with a powerful blow.

With a gurgling sort of gasp, the bully tumbled backward to the floor, and for a time lay there motionless.

"Reckon you've broke his neck!" a miner cried.

"Nary," the stranger answered. "No such good fortune. He has a neck like a buffalo bull. Let him lie there, till he gets ready to arise. Come, barkeeper, set 'em up again. We'll see who will spoil our beverage, this time!"

The order was obeyed, and the drinks tossed off, then the stranger took from his pocket a magnificent gold watch, and glanced at the time.

"It lacks a couple of minutes yet!" he said, looking from one to the other of the miners, "but a couple of minutes can make but little odds to me, I know. If any one should inquire for me, tell them my name is John Smith, or John Jones, or anything of the sort—I'm not particular what. So here goes!"

Before any one could comprehend his intention, he suddenly jerked a pistol from a holster upon his hip, and pressing the muzzle to his forehead—

Would have blown his brains out, had not a lithe figure leaped in through the doorway, and with a well-aimed blow, dashed the weapon to the floor where it exploded!

CHAPTER II.

KIT AND THE CHARMER.

"THEY won't do, pardner—chaw my ear fer a dinner-bell, if it will!" the new-comer cried, who had prevented the would-be suicide from accomplishing his purpose, just in the nick of time.

"Ef I was you, I'd go kick myself fer bein' sech a ninny. You're no better nor a suckin' calf, darned ef ye be. Afore I'd let any gal go git her grip on me, so thet I couldn't do nothin' better than commit suicide, I'd go duck my head in a bucket o' soft soap, and smother myself, I would!"

The speaker who delivered this harangue, was not a man, nor had he hardly the appearance of a boy, except that his figure was rather short. He was wirily built, however, and his countenance, with its waggish mouth, sparkling eyes, and wealth of dirt, wore an expression of shrewdness that bespoke him to be older in experience, by far, than in years.

His hair was of a brick-red color; and he was attired in a rough suit of clothing, boots whose patent-leather tops reached above his knees, and a slouched sombrero, jauntily turned up at one side.

Except for a rather dirty face, he was not a bad-looking youth.

His gaze met that of the would-be suicide without flinching, as he spoke.

"What the devil right had you to interfere in what was none of your business?" the tall stranger angrily demanded. "I've a mind to kick you out into the street."

"Sho! Ye wouldn't do that, now? Ye hain't got as much gratitude as a cat has, when ye rub its ba'r the wrong way!"

"Ef he had any gumption at all, he'd be thankin' ye," grunted a miner.

"On course he would!" the boy declared. "Su'thin' wrong in yer sky-parlor, ain't thar? A leak in the roof, or su'thin' the sort?"

"No, there's no leak in my roof, sir, but there will be in yours, if you ever attempt to meddle in my affairs again. Who are you?"

"Me? Oh! I'm Kit Bricktop, from Denver. What name d'ye swear to, when ye go to ther polls, ter vote?"

"It matters not what my name is. Mike Malone's as good as anything else, I reckon. Now stand aside, and let me pass."

"Nix-ee, Mr. Malone! Ye can't get out thet door, until ye promise me ye won't try no more susancide pranks!"

"I shall not be likely to try again, to-night."

"Sha'n't-be-likely-to, is a hoss of a different color. I want yer solid ante-mortem statement that ye won't do yerself no harm."

"What's the difference it makes to you, whether I live or die?" the stranger demanded, a puzzled look coming upon his face.

"That's jest w'at I ain't makin' publick, my daisy, an' I reck' ye don't want me to, nuther. So, now, ax me no more interrogatives, an' I'll tender ye no prevarications," and the boy gave his mouth a peculiar twist, as if to learn whether the big words had left it in its proper shape.

Malone, as he had titled himself, picked up his revolver, gave the boy another keen glance, and trode from the saloon.

Kit, the Denver Sport, then walked to the bar and purchased a cigar, after which he dropped into a seat and began to enjoy the weed, while he took a closer inventory of the peculiarities of the Shebang and its *habitués*.

He was also an object of great interest to the miners, for, that a mere boy should literally conquer a man like Malone, who in turn had gotten away with such a man as Big Blacksnake, seemed incredible to the spectators.

The gigantic ruffian soon recovered sufficiently to gain a sitting posture, where he remained for a few seconds, rubbing his thick throat, and glaring around him.

So savage did he look, that such of the men of Played-Out as were at the time in his vicinity, involuntarily shrank away.

"Bad" men there were among them, as the word is often applied to the cases of dare-devil, fight-craving toughs of the West, but the look of Big Blacksnake was so devilish that there were few who would have cared to cross him.

Then, too, he was well known in Played-Out by reputation. Stories had come down from Thunderville, of how he had bossed the town, causing peaceable people, as well as other classes, to stand in terror of being murdered by the ruffian.

Several men had been shot down by him, and he had been known to point with a sort of inhuman pride to the spots where his victims had been "planted."

Report said, too, that he had got his title, on his *debut* in Thunderville, by publicly swallowing a small blacksnake which he had caught.

As to the truth of this, however, no one appeared ready to vouch.

The blow he had received from Malone's fist had, in truth, very nearly dislocated his neck, and had so stiffened it that he could only turn his head with great pain.

"Whar's thet cussed galoot?" he gasped, in a wheezy voice, as soon as he could gain power of speech. "Show me thet dirty skunk w'ot hit me a belt on ther gullet. He's ther feller I want see!"

"He is gone!" the barkeeper answered. "You'd better let him alone, my Christian friend, ef ye don't want yer head bu'sted next time."

"Oh! I do, hey? I thort he hed broke my neck; but, durn my skin, I sp'iled ther treat, anyhow!"

"He set 'em up, tho', after you drapped."

"Sufferin' Marier! An' he didn't leave no smile paid for, fer me?"

"Nary a smile!"

Blacksnake regained his feet, jammed his hat upon his head, and glared at the assembled guests of the Shebaug.

"So I got left, hey?" he murmured. "Waal, I'll be darned! Hillo! fightin' Tom-cats an' flyin' boot-jacks! What's this my eyes behold?"

His gaze was fastened upon the stage, or rather, directed that way, as were all eyes in the room.

A little bell tinkled, the door back of the platform opened, and Miss Rai Roulere came upon the stage, bringing with her a stool and a neatly-mounted banjo.

"Order!" roared the bartender. "La Belle Mai will favor the gents with her charming songs. Arter that, she expects you galoots ter pan out right liberal in pay fer yer fun!"

A cheer went up from the crowd, at which Mai made a courtesy, and seating herself, began to tune her instrument with a skillful touch.

She looked very beautiful.

She was attired in a mull dress of snowiest white, which reached to a trifle above the ankles, and exposed a dainty pair of slippered feet.

At her throat was fastened a bunch of wild flowers, and more were arranged in her hair, which flowed in a flossy wealth to her tapering waist.

Young Christopher's eyes sparkled with admiration.

He was just arriving at that age when boy-love usually begins its existence as a passion, and he was ready to declare that the vision of female loveliness upon the stage was the sweetest of her sex upon the face of the earth.

"Phew! ain't she a daisy!" he commented to himself. "I'll jest bet a good two-cent Chicago cigar thet she's my divine affinity, or suthin o' the kind. I allers *did* hev an idea I'd run across some gal as would suit my taste, an' here's

proof of it. I'll jest manage ter git inter-dooed, an' see ef I can't make a mash on her!"

A few skillful turns of the keys, and Mai had her instrument in perfect tune; then, in a clear, pure voice, of marvelous sweetness, she sung a pathetic ballad in a manner that would have done credit to any experienced artist.

All agape with interest, the miners listened, their eyes rivited upon the attractive pet of the mines, in a way that bespoke respectful admiration.

So quiet was their demeanor, that a pin could have been heard to drop, but for the melody of the singer and the soft accompaniment of her instrument.

From his position Kit could watch them, and was agreeably surprised. Upon only one face was there aught but purest respect for the little beauty. That face belonged to the "terror" from Thunderville, Big Blacksnake.

There was a gloating expression of sensual admiration expressed on his countenance—a sinister gleam, boding no good intention, in his bold stare.

"Thet galoot means devilment!" Kit muttered; "but, big as he is, ef he tries to be too fresh with my charmer, chaw me up for a bale o' cotton ef I don't bounce him!"

Had any one overheard this declaration, and compared the youth with the ruffian, they must certainly have been amused.

Yet Kit meant every word of it, as was evident by the sharp flash of his eye.

At the conclusion of the ballad, the audience cheered vociferously, Kit doing his part, while the clap of Big Blacksnake's hands could be heard above the din.

Mai immediately struck up a banjo solo, of a lively character, and Kit, who had heard many professional artists in Chicago and Denver, could not recall one who could excel her. Her pretty fingers seemed to be especially designed for such work.

While she manipulated the instrument, her gaze roved over the rugged faces of her auditors, and she saw Kit, evidently for the first time.

His flushed, eager face, and admiring gaze, caused a faint rift of color to deepen the tinge upon her cheeks, and she averted her own gaze for a moment; but it was only for a moment. Their eyes met again, and a smile from her lips fairly made his heart jump up in his throat.

She once more averted her gaze, and did not look at him for some time, and then gave him merely a careless glance, that would not have implied the least recognition—at which Kit wondered if his heart wasn't endeavoring to creep down into his boots.

After the solo, she sung a couple more songs, to tremendous applause; then she arose, and made her courtesy.

"Now, then, ye galoots, shell out yer collat!" sung Fat Fred, Tim Flannigan's bartender. "All o' yees knows that charity begins ter home!"

Every miner responded by tossing a coin or two, of some denomination upon the stage, only to receive a winning smile of thanks, in payment.

The Denver Sport arose, advanced to the

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stage, and doffing his hat, tossed a nugget of solid gold at Mai's feet, while a murmur of astonishment passed among the spectators.

The nugget was nearly as large as a duck's egg!

Mai seemed greatly surprised, too, but, making one of her most charming courtesies, stooped and gathered up the gifts of her admirers.

At this instant, Big Blacksnake staggered forward. It was evident that he had overloaded himself with whisky, before he entered the saloon.

"Kerwhoop! Thomas cats fightin' an' boot-jacks a-flyin'!" he cried. "Et aire a durned rotten shame, but I ain't got a red cent ter give ye, my purty petticut!"

Mai gave him a startled glance.

"Thank you," she said, hastily. "It don't matter in the least. I have received a great plenty, and am very grateful for it."

"Oh! ye aire? Bully, gall! Thar's only one favor I kin give ye, an' that's a good solid kiss! Whoop-ee!" and he essayed to clamber upon the stage.

Before he could do so, however, a lithe figure bounded forward, and a strong arm jerked him down upon his back, on the floor.

Another instant and Kit stood upon the stage, with one arm about Mai's slender waist, while his right hand clutched a cocked revolver.

"None of thet kind o' bizness when Kit's around!" he cried sternly. "Ain't I right, pilgrims? Ye would none o' ye hev sech a bloated cuss as thet aire insult this gal, I know!"

A cheer of approval broke forth, and revolvers were whipped out on every hand.

Big Blacksnake scrambled to his feet, spitting out a mouthful of oaths, and glared around him savagely; but one glance was enough to assure him that to again attempt his purpose would be sure death.

Bull-headed and brutal though he was, he had sense enough to know when odds were too greatly against him.

Seeing no one else to vent his spite upon, he turned and glared at Kit, who was watching him keenly, ready to put a bullet through him at an instant's warning.

"See hyer, ye leetle scab of a cuss, d'ye know what I've a mind ter do wi' you?" Blacksnake roared, hoarsely.

"Nary!" Kit responded dryly; "but I know what I'm goin' ter do wi' you, ef ye ever even offer ter address this young lady again!"

"What now, ye young monkey?"

"Why, I'm goin' ter paste ye one right in the jaw wi' a chunk o' lead out o' one o' these six-shooters; you hear my gentle voice. An' ef evyer I hev occasion ter do it, you'll need a box and a grave-digger's sympathy ter git ye under sod!"

"Bah! I've a mind ter come up thar an' chaw off yer ear. I'm a bu'ster, I am—an' a bouncer, too!"

"Then you'd better bounce out of this camp, or you'll be sorry. The boys o' Played-Out don't allow no such rips as you about!"

Kit then turned to Mai, who clung to him, seeming greatly terrified.

"You had best retire from the stage now," he said, "before there's any further trouble."

"Oh, I am so frightened!" she whispered, in a trembling tone. "If—if you would only be so kind as to see me home, I—I should be very grateful!"

"You bet I will. Back this way?"

"Yes; we can go through the rear door. I always come that way."

Not without some degree of triumph did Kit accompany her behind the "scenes"—a board partition—and they left the building, she clinging to his arm.

CHAPTER III.

BOY LOVE.

EVERY inch a man did the Denver Sport feel, as he accompanied Mai from the Shebang through a dark part of the gulch—for old Roulere's cabin was situated some little distance from the other habitations.

"Oh! how can I ever thank you enough to express my gratitude toward you for your timely interference?" Mai said, drawing closer to him as they walked along. "You were so brave and thoughtful. I do believe those stupid miners would really have allowed that awful ruffian to assault me, even though they all like me."

"Who wouldn't like you, I'd like to know! Bless you, you'd set any one crazy! As for the miners, I reckon they was almost afraid ter tackle him."

"I should have thought you would have been afraid, too?"

"Nix-ee, Jeremiah! If it had been Old Nick hisself, an' you stan'in' there in peril, I'd have sailed in an' tried my hand on the old sardine. Tell ye, when thar's a purty girl in the case, an' she needs help, my blud goes a-b'ilin' way up inter the hundreds an' somethin' hes got to move."

"How about a homely girl, then?" Mai asked, laughingly.

"Oh! thet makes a heap o' difference! A feller has to struggle hard to git nerved up fer biz, then."

"Then I take it that you think I am pretty?"

"Bet I do! I think you're just the purtiest girl I ever saw."

"I am pleased to know your opinion is so favorable of me. I always considered myself quite plain. I think you are nice!"

"Get out! You're clubbing me now. My appearance ain't fu'st class, but I'm all myself, every day. I'm Kit Bricktop. Who are you?"

"Mai Roulere. Queer name, isn't it? I live with my father, a very dissipated person, who never will work, and I am forced to try and earn a living after the manner you saw to-night. It is very distasteful to me, I assure you, and I trust you will not think bad of me for being in such rough surroundings."

"Not a bit of it. I like your pluck, and I like you, too, you bet!"

"Thank you! I am glad you do, for it's quite a novelty to have any one like me, except the rough miners. How old are you, sir?"

"Well, I dunno, exactly; for you see my

obliging parents passed away when I was a little kid, not leavin' behind as much as an ink dot to show me my age, ancestral standing, and so forth. Kinder negligent in 'em, now wasn't it? But, anyhow, accordin' to all my scientific calkylations, I'm old enough ter git spliced ter some nice, little level-headed gal like you!"

"On, Kit! what an ideal! I don't intend to get married until I am thirty, at least."

"Git out! You'd be a vinegary, toothless old maid, by that time. How old are you?"

"Guess!"

"Sweet sixteen."

"Wrong! I am almost seventeen."

"Waal, ye're sixteen sweet enuff, till ye're seventeen. I'm over eighteen, I calculate, anyhow. An' I've jest made up my mind I'm goin' to stop off here, in Played-Out, awhile—that is, if ye will let me come to see ye."

"I could not refuse you that favor, sir, if it would be any pleasure to you," she replied, looking up into his face with a winning smile. "You must know you are young yet, however, to think of anything as serious as marriage. I am sure I shall value your friendship very much."

Kit did not make an immediate answer. It occurred to him that her words conveyed the idea that he was not old enough to be her lover—that her ideal was an older person.

He was almost ready to kick himself for so betraying his feelings, when she gave his arm a little squeeze, and looked coyly up into his face.

"Then you think you would like to come see me, eh?" she asked, softly.

"Nothing would please me better, I assure you."

"Then, I'll always bid you welcome. But, there's one thing I want to tell you. Here we are at my home. Wait a moment!"

They had reached a good-sized log-cabin, with two shuttered windows and a heavy door, on the front side.

Mai stepped cautiously to the door, and listened.

"There's some one in there, with papa. I do wonder who it can be?" she said, coming back to Kit. "Never mind; we won't go in yet. Come around here, out of the rain."

She led the way to a little shed, in the rear of the cabin, and once more took Kit by the arm.

"I wanted to tell you, sir, two things, which might seem queer to you. The man I call father—for Heaven only knows whether he is my father or not—is a very eccentric person. As I told you before, work he will not do, and more than two-thirds of the time he is drunk—sometimes stupidly so. Every stranger he sees he seems to consider an enemy, and through this fact you may have trouble with him."

"I'll risk it. I am not so much a stranger to his interests as I might be, ye know. But let that drop. What else did ye wish to say?"

"This. There is a man here named Lawton Leech, who is supposed to be very wealthy, and owns all the mining-claims, except a tract owned by my father. It seems to be the ambition of his life to get possession of father's tract, for, as I believe, he knows it is, or is destined to be, very valuable. He is also a suitor for my hand,

but you can guess how heartily I despise him. In fact—"

"What!"

"That!"—and she threw her arms around his neck and kissed him. "I like you. There, now—don't dare to kiss me, for I won't permit it. I just wanted to warn you to look out for Lawton Leech, as he may become your enemy."

"Oh! then you didn't want to kiss me, I take it?"

"Y-e-s—that is—I—oh! I don't know what. Come, let's go in the cabin, out of the wind and rain."

"One minute," and the boy lover put his arm around her waist and drew her to him. "You have made me the happiest fellow in Played-Out, and I only want the privilege of returning your favor. You will not deny me, little sweetheart?"

Her girlish upturned face, as her head rested upon his shoulder was answer enough, and he imprinted a shower of fervent kisses upon her cherry lips and forehead.

Then she gently released herself, and they went around to the front of the cabin, where Mai pulled the latch-string and opened the door.

Kit, with a heart beating high with exquisite pleasure, followed her into the commonly-furnished main apartment, and closed the door behind him.

Two men were seated at a rude table, upon which was a lighted candle. Both were persons apt to attract attention, but it was because, in some degree, of the contrasts between them.

One was an old man, with a face thin and pinched, but terribly reddened by the use of whisky; keen black eyes sunken in his head, and snowy-white hair. His face-expression was disagreeable, if not really villainous.

In form he was tall, but almost as thin as a skeleton, and he noticeably trembled, like one palsied.

His attire was old, ill-fitting and shabby.

The other party who sat opposite him, was a much younger man apparently about twenty-five or six—and, as Kit at once acknowledged, was a decidedly handsome personage.

He was about the medium stature of men, but splendidly framed, every muscle well developed and every curve gracefully rounded. His face was full enough to be decidedly handsome, adorned as it was by a graceful blonde mustache, that shaded a pleasant mouth; a dark blue eye, penetrating in its glance, yet possessed of a charming expression; and a wealth of chestnut-colored hair, that rippled back over his head, and down over his broad shoulders, after a manner that would have enthused a poet's pen.

A pair of patent-leather top boots were met by a pair of neatly setting trousers, belted at the waist, and connected with an elaborate trimmed white flannel shirt opened at his throat. A slouch sombrero lay beside his chair, in company with a belt of weapons, and a medium sized valise.

A noticeable feature about him, his hands, were very white and small, and had plainly never been accustomed to hard labor.

Kit saw Mai cast the stranger a shy inquisitive glance, and a spirit of jealousy assailed him. Perhaps this handsome fellow was her

ideal of what a lover should be, and she would henceforth look upon him, Kit, as a sort of spooney, fit to play with, when no better attraction was at hand.

"Father, this is Mr. Kit Bricktop," Mai said, turning to her hero. "Kit, this is my father, Mr. Roulere! The other gentleman's name I do not know!"

"This is Mr. Byron Milton, girl!" old Roulere hastily explained, in very good English. "He is a former friend of mine, just from California, and I want you to treat him as a respected guest of our home."

"I am delighted to meet Mr. Milton I am sure, and shall endeavor to make him welcome, for your sake, father!" Mai responded, courtesying to Milton's gallant bow.

"Right, girl—quite right. My friend Milton is an educated and refined gentleman of leisure, yet gifted as a poet and painter. And now, Mai, who is the young jackanapes with the dirty face that you have taken the liberty to bring here?"

"His name is Kit Bricktop, as I said, and you owe to him many thanks, instead of insulting him. He rescued me from being grossly insulted to-night, at the risk of losing his own life, and I am sure none of the miners would have raised a hand to help me!"

"Indeed! I suppose because he played the heroic you have fallen in love with him from the start?" the old man sneered, disagreeably.

"Maybe I have," Mai replied. "Anyhow, he is my friend, and I want you to act as a friend toward him."

"I don't fancy mixing up with strangers, my child. If the fellow deserves any thanks he has them. I'll attend to any lovely business on your part, however, my dear."

"I am not so sure about that," Mai said, with a toss of her head. "Here, Kit, take a seat near the fire. 'It is very wet and cold out.'"

"Thank you, but I will not have time to stop to-night. I have an errand yet to perform at the camp, so you will excuse me."

"Certainly; you might stay a few moments, however. Before you go I must prevail upon you to take back this valuable nugget, sir. I could not think of taking so great a prize, for even a gift, I assure you."

And she took the nugget from her pocket and extended it toward him.

"Oh, no—you must keep it as a present from me. I could not think of taking it back," Kit assured, hastily.

"Hello! what's that? Ha! d'ye see it, Milton? A nugget of gold, as I live, and it's a stunner, too. Of course you'll keep it, girl!"

And with a dexterous spring, that one would not have thought him capable of making, the old Frenchman snatched the nugget from Mai's hands.

"Oh, papa, how cruel of you! Please return it to me after you examine it. If Mr.—if Kit won't take it back, I want to retain it as a keepsake."

"Keep nothing!" Roulere sneered. "This nugget is worth a heap of money, girl, and I'll keep it for you—I'll keep it for ye. Much obliged to ye, young feller. Whar did you get it?"

"That is a secret of my own, old stockings,"

Kit replied, with spirit. "I gave that to the young lady as a present, an' I want ye ter give it back ter her."

"Ha! ha! Do you hear him, Milton? Just as though I ain't the girl's father an' natural guardian, and 'a' right to take possession of anything that's given her! Why, young man, you are off in the upper story, I believe."

"Not a bit of it. I see that you're an old pirate, tho', and where I could have done you a good turn, I won't do it now," and, turning, he opened the door and left the cabin.

Mai followed him out and closed the door, contrary to old Roulere's command.

"Don't let it worry you, Kit," she said, placing her hand upon his shoulder. "I ought to have known better than to have shown it, as I might have known he would appropriate it for rum."

"The mean old giraffe!" exclaimed the boy, indignantly. "Tell ye what, Miss Mai, I'll bet a cent to a toothpick the old snoozer ain't no more yer father than I am."

An eager expression came into her beautiful eyes as they gazed into his face.

"Do you think so, Kit? Others have hinted as much, but I never knew what to believe."

"Does an elerfant's progeny look like a fawn, or a giraffe's like a canary bird?" demanded her lover. "Not much they don't, an' you ain't a Roulere, by a long shot. Just you remember what I say, an' you stick like a Spa'din's glue to Denver Kit—that's me—and I shouldn't be surprised if he figgers out who you are afore long. As fer the nugget, jest say nothin'. Ef the old man spends it fer liquor, I'll try and get it back for you. If I fail, I know where there's more of 'em."

"Oh! Kit, do you really? It would make you rich!"

"I should ker-smile! I ain't so orful dead broke, anyhow, 'thout 'em. Guess I'll go, now. Don't reckon ther's any use o' my callin' on ye heerafter?"

"Why not?"

"Oh! two's company—three's a crowd."

"Pshaw! you silly fellow. You're not hinting at Mr. Milton, I hope? He's nothing to me."

"Mebbe not, but I've allus tuk notice that these well-educated, poetic sort o' plums, wi' good togs, a purty phiz, an' ther scent o' 'love among the roses' about 'em, allers come out ten laps ter a mile ahead o' us common chaps."

"Nonsense! A girl with good sense does not look to clothes, poetry or a baby face. Don't let Mr. Milton worry you a bit. I like you, and that settles it, don't it?"

"It ought to!" Kit replied, drawing her to him, and kissing her fondly. "I won't be a bit jealous of you, until I see cause. So, now, good-night."

"Good-night, Kit. Be very careful not to get hurt."

"Little fear of that, I guess. I have made it a point to look out for myself lately. By-by!"

They separated then, Mai re-entering the cabin, and the Denver Sport striding away toward the camp proper, not really as happy as he might have been, were handsome Mr. Byron Milton located a thousand miles distant from the little town of Played-Out.

CHAPTER IV.

KIT SECURES AN ENEMY.

WHEN Mai returned to the interior of the cabin, it was to receive a savage scowl from old Roulere, while the expression upon the face of Mr. Byron Milton was not altogether one of satisfaction.

"Do you know I've a notion to whip you severely, girl?" the old man cried, angrily. "You ought to be ashamed of yourself!"

"I don't know why I should be," Mai replied, a little independently, as she seated herself near the fire.

"You don't, eh? You're very ignorant, all at once. You ought to be ashamed for encouraging the impudence and audacity of the young vagabond you brought here to-night. It was the height of insult to follow him out of doors, especially when you were leaving our distinguished guest behind."

"I trust Mr. Milton will pardon my thoughtlessness!" Mai replied. "As for Kit, he is not a vagabond, but a brave, nice gentleman from Denver, and what's more, my lover!"

"Your what? Girl, you're mad!"

"Oh! no. I don't get mad easily, or I should not have put up with your disgraceful actions as long as I have, sir!"

"Stop! Don't you dare to speak back to your father in that way! Shame to you, to talk back to a parent that has reared you as kindly as I have."

"I fail to see where you have been so extremely fatherly," Mai flashed back, tapping her little slippered foot upon the hearth. "But for what support I have been compelled to earn for you, you would have starved, several years ago!"

Roulere gnawed his lip savagely, and smothered an oath. He knew that all he might say would avail nothing more than to expose his faults, as Mai invariably managed to get the best of him, in an argument.

"Maybe you are right," he meekly answered, a few minutes later. "I have been dissipated 'tis true, but I mean, now, to lead a better life. Next to you, my child, my warmest interest is centered in Byron here, than whom a worthier young man the sun never shone upon. He has come here to pay us a visit, and the best you can treat him he fully deserves. Being of aristocratic birth, and exceptional refinement, I do pray and hope you will devote your constant attention to his wants, and make his visit socially pleasant!"

Mai listened, in some little wonderment.

Far different from his usual coarse and ungrammatical harangue, was Roth Roulere's conversation now.

The arrival of Mr. Byron Milton, too, had had more than this one apparent effect upon him—he was not, for a wonder, in the least intoxicated.

"If I can make Mr. Milton's stay pleasant to him, I shall try to do so, as I said once before!" Mai replied.

"But you haven't promised not to have anything whatever to do with this unknown boy you call Kit!" Roulere persisted frowning.

"Neither do I intend to!" Mai answered, spiritedly. "Kit is as well known to me as

your friend is, and he did me a service I should repay with my ardent love. Of course it cannot matter to Mr. Milton whom I fancy."

"Confound you, girl! will you bush up such nonsense? Why, I've a mind to box your ears! If you are beginning to look for lovers, you will do well to single out at least a gentleman—not a smutty-faced, beardless vagabond of a boy."

"Bah!" and Mai gave vent to a sarcastic little laugh. "It isn't the beard on a man's face which commands a girl's affection; it's the nature of the beast, as the miners say. As for Kit's being a vagabond, I know better. So, there! I am not going to say another word!" And arising, Mai walked to her own apartment, which she entered, closing and locking the door behind her.

Byron Milton smiled as he looked into Roulere's furrowed face, after her departure.

"Well," he said, in a scarcely audible tone, "it seems I have a rival to contend with."

"Rival be hanged! You don't know the girl!" the old man hissed. "She's an enigma that even I have never been able to solve since she has grown up. Don't you mind a word she says, but play your hand with studious care, and you'll win her. She don't care as much as she declares for that brat of a boy, and I saw the moment she looked upon you that you favorably impressed her. With your handsome face and agreeable ways you ought to make short work of winning her."

"The sooner the better, to suit you, I suppose?"

"Aha—you bet! With the prospects ahead, old Roth Roulere can afford to leave off drinking for a time."

"See that you do!" Milton said, in a decisive tone. "As for your—your daughter, I was never more favorably impressed with a young lady in my life. I have long sought for my ideal, and at last I have found it—the very one I would take the chances of making my wife to-morrow, did I get the opportunity."

He said this aloud, evidently intending it for Mai's ears should she be listening.

"No purer, better girl than my Mai could you seek, friend Milton. But, you will learn that when you get better acquainted with her. Now, as it is getting late, I propose that we turn in. You will occupy the room adjoining mine, yonder, which I trust you will find as comfortable as the generality of dens we have in such Western towns as Played-Out."

"I can sleep 'most anywhere, not being troubled with a restless mind," Milton replied, laughingly.

And they "turned in," as the expression goes, for the night.

Lodgings and boarding-places in Played-Out were at a premium, so to speak, for few, if any of the miners cared to take in strangers, and when Tim Flannigan couldn't accommodate a chance pilgrim, the pilgrim in question generally had to sleep out of doors.

Judging that such might be the case, Kit directed his footsteps back toward Flannigan's Shebang.

As he proceeded, his thoughts were varied.

"Here's a go!" he soliloquized. "Jest back

from Denver, arter that Ghouls Gulch adventure, a bit older, a bit wiser, and hev run ker-slap inter another racket, by gum! Waltzed down inter this God-forsaken hole, expectin' ter find all the folks dead or asleep; hev an adventure, strike it rich; hev another adventure; git nicely settled down; hev another adventure, then fall slap-bank in love wi' a purty girl, and so-forth, and so-forth—all wi'in ther minutes ov a monkey's meal-time. Wonder what'll come next? Hard to tell; but, anyhow, thar's fun ahead, sure pop! There's a case for me to figger on, where Mai is concerned. She ain't no more old Roulere's daughter than she is Marthy Washington—that's registered! Let me see—then thar's the purty posey, wi' ther poetry name. He's bin imported on, hyer, jest on purpose ter try an' git Mai fer his wife. That's patented. Now, mebbe he is a fair-ter-middlin' honest-lookin' galoot, but I'll bet there's somethin' in it. There's a game on the board, where the ace and king scoops the boodle, an' the queen gits nary. Milton is the ace. Roulere's the king, an' Mai, she's ther queen. Reckon I must come in fer high, low an' jack, then, in order ter stand an' ordinary New York boarding-house racket! Now, then, Milton he looks like a high-toner, wi' an eye ter strikin' a puddin', as would set him on his taps fer life. Bet ef thar warn't shekels ahead he wouldn't be hyer, an' Mai c'uld go to blazes. That's *my* opinion!"

His boyish interest in Mai, or more properly, his boyish love for her, made him resolve, if possible, to ferret out the mystery concerning her—for a mystery he felt sure there was, connected with her birth, or her early life; and such being the case, it was apparent to him that Byron Milton and old Roulere, meant to make some money out of it.

"The thing of it is," he muttered, "I'm a leetle afeard Mai will go back on me. She's a gal w'ot looks like as if she'd enjoy coquetry, an' ten to one she'll get stuck on Milton's purty face an' poetry. Ef I hed the proper togs, I might reel off a few yards about shimmerin' stars, gentle breezes an' cyclones, an' perfumery of sunflower; but I ain't a beau ideal uv a Romeo. The togs is lackin', an' ther' ain't no place to git any heerabouts. Ef Mai goes back on me, tho', I'll hev to work some game ter cut his poetical nibs out."

When he reached the Shebang, Big Blacksnake, the ruffian, was nowhere to be seen, and Kit did not feel enough concerned to ask where he had gone.

Some of the miners were at the tables, playing cards; half a dozen others were at the bar, drinking in company with a man, at whom Kit made bold to take a second glance.

He was a largely-built person, with a strikingly handsome face, black eyes, gray mustache and brown hair.

But for a rather sinister squint of the eyes, there was nothing in the man's appearance to prejudice any one against him, for he was well-dressed, and appeared to have a gentlemanly bearing.

This was Lawton Leech, who owned all of the claims in Played-Out, with the exception of old Roulere's tract.

On inquiry, Kit found that he could get a

room over the saloon, and have his meals served in it; and as this suited him very well, he paid down for the same for a week in advance, and then sought a table where to sit down and enjoy a cigar.

He had been seated but a few minutes, when he felt a tap on the shoulder, and saw Lawton Leech standing close at hand. He, however, immediately took a seat across the table from Kit.

"Excuse me, young man," he said, stroking his snowy mustache, "but I believe I am greatly indebted to you."

"Is that so?" Kit asked, eying his accoster keenly. "If that's the case, you'd better pay up before the account gets any larger, as I shall charge compound interest after the first of the year."

"You don't understand me. You did me a great favor, and I wished to offer you my sincere thanks!"

"Been takin' a drop too much, ain't ye?" Kit asked in surprise, for he could not understand what the man was getting at.

"Not a drop. I see you still don't understand. You rescued Miss Mai Roulere from a ruffian's attempted insult. Therefore, you see, you place me under many obligations to you."

"Oh, I do!"

"Exactly. You see, to make it still plainer to you, I am Lawton Leech, the wealthiest man in Played-Out, and Miss Mai is my intended wife."

"Oh, she is?"

"Certainly!"

"Does she know anything about it?"

"To be sure! Why do you ask?"

"Well, it kinder struck me as sing'lar. Heerd her mention ye, but 'twaren't in a way as would be apt to tickle a mule so he'd laugh hisself sick!"

"Do you mean to intimate she did not speak well of me?" Leech demanded, his eyes flashing.

"Reckon that's how. She allowed I could guess how she despised yer, an' judgin' by ther trans-tranquillity of her brow, I calkylated she hadn't no more luv' fer you than a mad hornet has fer a man on a mowin'-masheen."

"Bah! She's a dear little coquette, and delights to tantalize me. She's mine, solid enough."

"Dunno 'bout that, Mister Millionaire."

"Don't know about it? What do you mean, you rat?"

"I mean that I doubt yer word. There 'appens to be, as the Henglishmen say, another candydate in the field—yas, two of 'em. One ov 'em hev got a monop'ly ov the hull bizness; t'other one is workin' a blind, w'ot he ken't never git thr'u'."

"Humph! Who are these that dare to interfere with *my* game?"

"Well, fu'stly, there's a feller called Kit Bricktop, from Denver. He is a champion bean-eater, has the head of the field—that is grips ther monopoly, and pools aire sellin' on him fifty per minnit. The t'other feller is a great looker, spits out poetry by ther yard, paints picters, an' bows ter the name of Byron Shakespeare Milton, E-s-q. But he hain't got a canary-bird's show, 'long side of you and I."

"You and I?" Leech sneered.

"No—you and I!" Kit retorted. "I'm the bean-bouncer, tho' I'm dubbed the Denver Sport out here. I've got the purty banjo-picker down fine, an' we're goin' ter get spliced in a day or so. Why, ef you will apply your nose to my cheek, ye'll smell where she kissed me not more'n an hour ago."

"Nonsense! Enough of this chaffing. I don't believe a word you say. The girl b'longs to me, and all the imps of Hades can't take her away from me!"

"Glad ye think so, boss; but you'll get left so bad ye won't never be able to tell where yer right hand is."

"Never fear, my little bantam. I run this town of Played-Out, and I make it a point to have my own way. Now, there's something I want to know, and if you know when your skin's on you, you will do well to answer. What did you come here to this camp for?"

"Jist drapped down here by chance!"

"None of your lying to me. What are you hanging around for?"

"Ob, nothin' much. Hain't been here long. Guess, however, I'll lay around fer snaps, an' court up the banjo-picker, since she's taken sech a shine to me."

"I'll court ye! You won't lay around this camp, my smart pipkin, not if I know it."

"How d'ye know?"

"I'll let you know as soon as it comes daylight."

"So, I can't stay here?"

"Not by a long sight. We don't want such banties around as you."

"How you goin' to help yourself?"

"Easily enough. When I say go, you can bet you vamoze!"

The mine monarch was getting very wroth at Kit's sang froid.

"Who's goin' to make me vamoze?" he asked, provokingly.

"I am."

"S'posin' I won't go?"

Leech was about to make some fierce sort of answer, when a miner came sauntering up to the table, his eyes gleaming greedily.

"I say, Mister Leech?" he began.

"Well, Bings, what is it?" Leech demanded, gruffly.

"Ye hearn tell 'bout ther big nugget, Mr. Leech?"

"Ah! yes, yes!"

"Well, this is the young feller w'ot flung it on the stage, ye know, an' it's we men of Played-Out as wants ter know where he found it."

Lawton Leech instantly turned his gleaming eyes upon the young sport.

CHAPTER V.

THE RACKET.

KIT returned the stare with interest. Somehow he had a faculty of being looked at, abused, or made fun of, without allowing his composure to be disturbed.

"Well, d'ye see anything green?" he demanded. "One would suppose I was a double-action rhinoserious, or a roarin' African perarie dorg, the way ye look at me."

"Where did you get that nugget of gold which

Bings speaks of?" Leech demanded, in thunderous tones.

"Oh! Jaminy! ye needn't holler so loud. I ain't deaf."

"Answer me! Where did ye get it?"

"Where the woodbine twineth an' the owl hoots tiil one P. M."

Leech uttered a curse.

"Are ye goin' to tell me?" he gritted, his rage growing in intensity all the time.

"What'll I tell ye fer?"

"Because I command you to."

"Jest 'cause ye say so, eh?"

"Certainly."

"I'll be darned ef I will. 'Tain't none o' your business, Mr. Lawton Leech!"

"Satan take your impudence! I'll show you if it ain't!" and he drew a revolver from his hip holster, and cocked it.

"What ye goin' to do with that?" Kit demanded, his composure apparently as perfect as ever.

"I'll show you, you brat! Now do ye out with it, where ye found that nugget—or I'll blow yer brains all over this room!"

Kit burst into a ringing laugh.

"Git out! Ye wouldn't now, would you?" he asked, with mock earnestness. "Why, 'pon my word, thar's not enuff brains in my hull noddle to cover a common pancake griddle."

"For once and the last time, are you going to tell? If you don't, off goes your head!"

"I won't tell ye. Shute me, ef you want to, but ye'll only lose the secret for good then."

Lawton Leech glared at the boy, his expression a mixture of admiration and anger.

"By thunder, you've nerver!" he growled, while a murmur of assent escaped the miners, who had gathered around the two.

"You bet I've nerver! Swallowed sixteen bottles of nervine when I was a month old, and was brought up on a suckin' bottleful of smart-weed!" Kit said, dryly.

"Shet up! I've a mind to blow your head off, as it is!"

"Now, Lawty, dear, you wouldn't be so rash. It would be simply ridiculous of you. You are really too smart a villain for that, ain't you? Ef you was to git on bad terms enuff wi' me, ter shute me, think of ther piles an' piles an' piles of golden nuggets you'd be puttin' fer-ever but o' yer reach."

"Cuss ye! Why don't you let us fellows know where they are to be found?"

"Because I'm goin' to work a nice little racket, ye know, what will put me on my pins fer some time to come. Ter-morrer, I'm goin' ter sell stock on my bonanza, an' continue till I git all sold. I'm jest goin' ter make Played-Out this side o' nowhere ter boom. When ther stock aire all sold, an' my company formed, I'll show 'em whar ther's ther biggest vein o' gold that war ever struck in these parts. Another thing; I'm boss o' ther consarn, an' I ain't goin' ter allow no rich bug to gobble up all ther cream an' butter. Ther poor, honest miners aire goin' to hev a smell at the soup, or my name ain't Kit Bricktop!"

"Hurray! that's ther talk fer ye, boys, every time! Whoop her up, now—long life an' prosperity to Kit the Denver Sport!" cried a miner.

This sentiment seemed infectious, for, together, and with one accord, they gave three hearty cheers, that fairly made the building tremble.

With an expression of malignant hatred upon his face, Lawton Leech arose from his seat, and restored his weapon to its holster.

"Blaze away, my young pippin!" he growled. "You'll find out how you'll succeed!"

He then stalked from the room.

He would probably have carried on the quarrel, but saw that Kit had, in one minute, gained a solid popularity with the miners, and should he, Leech, injure their new favorite, he would lose his own hold upon the few hardy men who made up the population of Played-Out.

To do this, meant to lose power, and that he could ill-afford, until he had accomplished several purposes which he had in view; consequently, he was discreet enough to retire from the saloon, before committing any rash act, that he would have afterward been sorry for.

After he was gone, Kit ordered the bartender to "set 'em up" for the crowd; then, as soon as he could get away, the boy sought his room, which was immediately over the bar-room, and not a bad apartment.

It was long past supper hour, but he did not immediately retire.

He produced a couple of sheets of large paper, and a marking pencil, from his pocket, and spreading the paper upon the table, began to mark out an advertisement, soon proving himself to be an adept in the art of lettering.

It took some time to complete this job, but at last he laid the pencil aside.

The poster bore the following words:

TAKE NOTICE! BIG SCHEME!

GUARANTEED! FORTUNE IN IT! GUARANTEED!

"I, Kit Bricktop, having located an immense mine, will to-day open a sale of shares of stock, the number of shares limited to ten thousand. No more than one thousand shares sold to one person, or for one person. Mine to be shown to all, as soon as all shares are disposed of. Sale to continue till all are sold. Price, per share, \$25. Sold in fifths at \$5 each. I reserve two hundred shares, for myself, and am to be president, manager and cashier."

"KIT BRICKTOP."

This was not posted until the next morning, and really didn't need posting then, for it had been well advertised by the miners themselves.

But it was read, all the same, and over and over a dozen times.

The excitement waxed hot.

The miners refused to go to work, and hung about the saloon, upon one side of which the bulletin had been posted.

The name of Kit Bricktop was in every one's mouth.

The Denver Sport was the boss boy.

He had brought luck to the camp.

Played-Out had a future.

Kit was to be her lucky star.

She would lay Leadville totally in the shade.

Where was Kit?

These and many other questions and remarks, passed from mouth to mouth.

Kit was a much-wanted personage,

In his room, said Fat Fred, in answer to all inquiries.

The sun arose, noonward, Kit made his appearance, and when he did, he was regarded with great curiosity; and many murmurs of wonderment, and some of doubt, were expressed.

That one so young, should undertake a great financial enterprise, had a savoring of mystery.

Kit had washed his face, combed his hair, and in many other ways added materially to a change of appearance for the better.

His entrance to the saloon was but the signal for the eager crowd to follow, and in order to escape being enveloped in a perfect jam, he was obliged to mount a card-table for safety.

"Take it easy, pilgrims!" he remarked, as each man struggled to get a front position. "One would think I war Petey Barnum or Henry Ward Beecher, ther way ye act. Jest hold yer hosses, an' I'll give ye all a peep at ther elerphant, d'rectly."

He then fished around in his pockets, and brought forth a package of blank receipts.

"Now, gents, ye understand, by ther notis I posted, jest what I'm goin' ter do. I am hero ter sell stock in ther great Bricktop Minin' Concern, which is yet undeweloped. 'Tain't no fraud, ye kin bet, fer here's a galoot as wouldn't cheat an honest workin'man out of a cent!"

Enthusiastic cheers.

"Remember, I'm sellin' stock, calculatin' ther thing will pan out to our mutual advantage. Ef it should play out, arter awhile, course 'tain't my fault. Now, then, whoever pays in fer stock gits a receipt, entitling him to so many shares of stock, an' when the mine aire open, he gits his share of the dividends declared 'cordin' ter what stock he has subscribed fer. D'ye savy, me daisies?"

"I reckon as how we ain't perzactly dumb!" one miner allowed. "But, ye see, we hain't got nothin' more than yer word fer it, that ye ain't shettin' our eye up wi' moonshine."

"Of course ye ain't!" growled Lawton Leech, who had made it his business to be present. "Ef ye hev any faith in what that young black-leg says you'll get hit like p'izen, and I'll not pity ye."

"Shet yer vocabulator, Lawton dear!" Kit sung out. "Ef these fellers gits bit I'll treat. Them 'aire don't look much as tho' I were puttin' up a job, do they?"

And he took from his pockets a pair of golden nuggets, full as large, if not larger than the one he had tossed upon the stage, the previous night.

A baffled curse burst from Leech's lips, at sight of these trophies, while the miners uttered exclamations of delight.

"I say thar, ye jackanapes! I'll buy all ther stock you've got!"

"Will ye, Lawty? I wouldn't ef I was you, seein' as a thousand shares is a limit ter the sale, to one inderwidual! Now, then, galoots, recollect hyer's yer chance ter strike it rich; so size up yer piles, an' go in as heavy as ye can stand!"

"I'll take a thousand shares. I'll settle with you after you get through there!" Leech cried, pompously.

"Oh! will ye? Walk right up here and slap down your collat, or not a share do you get, bet yer navigators on that! So, now, who sets the ball a-rolling?"

"I'll take two shares if it bu'sts me!" a miner came to time with, as he handed up his fifty dollars in gold.

"That's business! Here's one man wi' some sand in him!" Kit cried. "Nothin' like havin' plenty o' sand, gents. Yer name, pardner?"

"Zeb Folks, me boy."

"How are you, Zeb! Here's yer receipt for two shares of Bricktop Mining Concern stock. May all sech folks as you live long and die happy! Who's the next lucky man that's got the tin and wants to chip in?"

Another miner took five shares, another one, five others raised a purse and bought a fifth, each; and so on, and the more that were sold, the greater appeared to be the demand.

And it seemed all at once as though the population of Played-Out Camp had suddenly increased. Strangers were seen at every hand with fists full of money, and it kept the young financier busy to rake in the cash and make out receipts.

"Recollect, feller-citizens," he would shout every once in a while, "thet each man's shares aire made out in his own name, as his own property; therefore, accordin' ter my constertution an' by-laws, no man aire allowed ter dispose uv his stock without a meetin' o' the other stockholders decides that the would-be member is a desirable person to become a member of our company. Under no circumstances shall a member be allowed to sell to another member who has exceeding nine hundred and ninety-nine shares. This is to prevent one hog from swallowing all the swill!"

Share after share went off, and Kit's pockets became heavy with money—bills and coin. Many of the miners who bit lightly at first, would buy again later.

It was pretty nigh noon when Kit caught sight of Byron Milton standing among the crowd.

"Hillo, poet!" he cried. "Ain't yer goin' ter buy a block o' ther tartest minin' stock ever shoved on ther market? Guarantee thet ten days from now ye can't tech a share wi'out payin' a big premium."

"Oh! I might risk a hundred shares, I suppose!" Milton replied carelessly, as if he were not over-particular whether or no he ever realized anything from the investment. "Here's your money."

"B'iled onions an' Hoboken hash! Sold ag'in, an' raked in the tin!" yelled Kit, as he handed the artist-author a receipt in exchange for the money.

"Most grub time, gents. You fellers as wants ter invest, jest amble right up to ther manager, as I shall sell no more shares at public sale. All as don't git 'em now, will hev to apply at my office ter-morrer, when, ten ter one, the stock will hev jumped up fifty per cent. or more!"

This caused a new rush, and the buying was lively.

Two distinguished-looking, well-dressed gentlemen, who evidently were new-comers, and

Eastern men, stepped up and purchased a thousand shares each.

"Thet's ther way ter do it!" Kit cried. "There's three thousand shares yet unsold. Sale is over fer to-day. Every man put his corporosity to the bar, and drink to the expense of Kit Bricktop!"

Thirsty pilgrims were the men of Played-Out, and had one of their number refused to imbibe, he would have been considered either a fool or a lunatic.

The sale was over, as Kit had announced, and he escaped from the saloon as soon as possible and sought his room.

He had sold five thousand shares, at twenty-five dollars per share, and had in his several big pockets the neat little sum of one hundred and twenty-five thousand dollars, spot cash!

He counted it over, with sparkling eyes.

"Christopher Bricktop, you were born fer luck!" he soliloquized, striking his chin, complacently. "Ef ye wern't, I'll chew spruce gum all my natteral born days. You've got inter jest ther greatest racket uv yer life, an' ef ye kin only keep yer brain clear, an' play yer cards right, ye hev struck a reg'lar Cbicago rice puddin', raisens an' all. But, look ye a little out, my bloomin' Christofer! Ye've got a bloody lot o' work to do, an' it's got ter be did as quick, comparatively, as a muel kin paw a fly off'm his ear. There's work both broad, shrewd, and delicate, an' there's only two ways about it. You've got ther biggest elerfunt on yer hands which a kid of yer statter ever had. Ef ye succeed, ye'r' a trump, an' win a queen. Ef ye fail, ye'r' gone—higher'n a kite, an' ther pilgrims of Played Out will use yer head fer a football!"

CHAPTER VI.

A STRANGE QUEST.

THE Leadville *Leader*, one morning, contained the following advertisement in one of its business columns, which might have seemed rather out of place in that rough and ready metropolis, for articles of value, if lost, were seldom if ever heard from, while it may be safe to venture that the average finder of any article of value never troubled him or herself to hunt up the rightful owner.

The advertisement in question was as follows:

"\$500 REWARD.—Lost on the 20th inst., (don't know but it was stolen,) on the road from Leadville to Oroville, an ebony box, 8 inches long by 6 wide and 4 deep, containing documents of great value to owner but worthless to any one else. The above reward will be paid and no questions asked for the return of box and papers intact to owner.

"MORTON MILES,

"Clarendon Hotel, Leadville."

It is possible that the attention of the public was attracted to the advertisement, but little heed was taken of it, and it is safe to say that Morton Miles and his lost box passed quickly out of the minds of Leadville's busy people.

And why should it not be so?

One of the two gentlemen who had bought stock in Kit's mining concern had given his name as Morton Miles, while the other and younger of the two, by a couple of years, had given his name as Paul Slensby.

But one more vacant room had Tim Flannigan over the Shebang, and this the two gentlemen availed themselves of immediately after the sale.

Mr. Miles was a man of fifty-five years, although his appearance would hardly have placed him among men of that age. His hair and beard were only slightly sprinkled with silver threads, and his face was one that wore a kind, noble expression.

Mr. Slensby was rather the handsomer of the two—in a figurative sense, more of a ladies' man, as it were. He wore a handsome mustache and immense, wavy side-whiskers, and had beautiful eyes of tranquil brown. There were crow's tracks about them, however, that a good judge of human character would not have really liked.

After making as good a toilet as the conveniences of their apartment would admit, they seated themselves at the rude table and each lit a cigar.

"What do you think of our speculation?" Slensby asked, gazing dreamily at his companion through a cloud of smoke. "My opinion is that the fellow is a fraud, and we're sold."

"I can't say that I hardly agree with you on that point. The lad is really 'most too young to venture into so gigantic a fraud, as it would be in case it does turn out bad. At any rate, we need not growl, for we understood the chances we were taking when we invested. The boy is a genius, and I judge he has happened to discover a good lead, and means to feather his nest, first, and let the others take their chances."

"Possibly. Well, here we are in Played-Out, at last, and I'm pretty well played out, myself, I assure you. Fine-looking town to find our game in, I'll swear!"

"I am not greatly impressed with the place, myself. As likely to be a den of cut-throats as anything else. Let me see that letter again, Slensby. You had it last, I believe."

Slensby took an envelope from his pocket, extracted a letter from it and tossed it to his companion.

Mr. Miles spread it out before him on the table, and gave it a careful perusal, while Slensby smoked his cigar, and watched the reader with an indolent expression.

The missive was penned in a good style of chirography, and ran as follows:

"PLAYED-OUT, Oct. 24, 18—.

"HON. MORTON MILES:—

"SIR:—By merest chance, I saw your advertisement in a late issue of the *Leadville Leader*, and hasten to answer.

"While on my way to this camp, a few nights ago, I was accosted in a lonely spot by a ragged tramp, who asked for money. Being unfavorably impressed with him, I refused him alms, when he threatened to shoot me. Being a little sprier than he, I knocked him over the head, and he fell senseless. In falling, an ebony box slipped from under his coat, and struck a rock, and was shattered pretty well to pieces. Seeing that it contained papers, and believing they had been stolen, I brought them with me, together with the wreck of the box.

"Natural curiosity prompted me to give them an examination, and, of course, you are aware what I learned, in part. I learned something else of importance, which you have no idea of. Therefore, I

would see you personally, as there are certain things to be understood and considered before you receive the documents. When you see me I shall be masked and unknown to you, and moreover, I shall be playing a part. But, understand *this*—I shall be playing *directly into your hands*, and it will be to your interest to treat me gentlemanly, and not attempt to penetrate my disguise. If you do, the whole bubble is bursted, and you will never get your papers or gain the point you have in view. I give you my word for this.

"Come to Played-Out and bide your time. When I find it convenient, I will appoint an interview. If you see *anything* that startles you, or a *sybdy* that recalls a recollection, be as if you were stone, lest you betray yourself. I *command* this; if you disobey I'll not do another thing. Keep the name you now bear. If your enemies were to find you out, I wouldn't give five cents for your life. Remember, my eyes shall be upon you when least you think of it.

"Yours very truly,

"OLD OXFORD."

Mr. Miles looked up from the letter with a wearied expression.

"Oh! Heaven, when shall this ever end, Slensby?" he groaned. "I am getting to despair of ever gaining a point toward the culmination."

"I am truly gratified to hear that. You certainly have raced me around the country, until I do really believe I am getting gray hairs, and shall soon have to walk with a cane."

"Nonsense! You are infernal lazy. What care you where you go, as long as you have a fortune to inherit, when I die unless—"

"How many times have you mentioned that word? I hate it. I don't expect to succeed you, my beloved cousin—I don't want to. Of a quarter of a million, my beloved mother-in-law left me, I have still a good fifty thousand left, besides the wad I was fool enough to drop into the young vagabond's hands, a few minutes ago, in exchange for a piece of paper. Bah! I've a mind to light a cigar with it!"

"Don't. You may realize handsomely on it. What troubles me are the papers, and to know who this Old Oxford is. For my part, I am all in the dark."

"The fellow is undoubtedly some sharp, who, having gained an inkling of the truth, means to work you for a gold mine. If you let him, you're a fool."

"I am no fool!"

"Well, suit yourself about that. Why, if I bothered myself as much about the trouble I had, as you have, I'd be dead, long ago. You, even, are getting as gray as a badger."

"They are gray hairs of honor, though!" Mr. Miles said, proudly. "I suppose there is nothing to do, but wait till we hear from this unknown correspondent again."

"Nothing. We need rest—you, especially. If you will lie down, I'll just run below, get a cocktail, and see if I can't induce some one into a game of old sledge!"

"Thank you; I believe I will take your advice."

So, Slensby went below.

That afternoon's stage brought down a load of out-of-work pilgrims from Thunderville. Nearly fifty there were, who had heard of the new breeze stirred up at Played-Out, and

wanted to be on hand to participate in any bonanza excitement that might take place.

Directly after the stage came ten huge wagon-loads of lumber, which Kit had sent a messenger after, to the Thunderville mill.

By paying a big price, he had secured a good building site, and in ten minutes after the arrival of the lumber, all the available help in the camp were hard at work, "slashing" up a frame, or huge shanty, under Kit's direction.

Kit Bricktop was the name on every one's tongue. He was literally the biggest "bug" in Played-Out, and was an object of much curiosity.

And although he was aware that his "racket," as he termed it, was creating considerable sensation, he was as cool and collected as a judge.

He foresaw that Played-Out was to have a temporary boom, and that a hotel was necessary to accommodate the rush that would surely come.

Such a place would quickly pay for itself, and also add to the already infant excitement that his advent had been the means of causing.

The men worked like beavers, seeming inspired to make their employer's success doubly sure.

Kit gave directions rapidly and concisely, and the building went up "a-humming."

During the afternoon, Mr. Byron Milton came strolling down to the scene of the building, with Mai leaning on his arm.

Kit saw them approaching, and a pained glitter came into his eyes, and his face became a shade paler.

"It is as I thought!" he muttered. "I'll keep out of their way."

He managed to do this very cleverly for a time, by going to different sides of the building; but he found that they dogged his steps with persistency, and finally Mai left Milton, and ran forward and caught him by the arm.

"Why, Kit, didn't you know that we were here?" she asked, facing him about, and looking up into his face with her sparkling eyes.

"Yes," he answered, absently.

"Oh! did you? Then I just believe you have been trying to dodge us!"

"I have been very busy."

"Too busy to speak to me, eh? Oh, you goose, you ought to have your ears boxed. You see, I asked Mr. Milton to accompany me down here. There were so many strange men I didn't like to come alone."

"It was quite proper of you. I am glad you came," Kit said, with a smile he could not suppress, while Milton toyed nervously in the sand with the walking-stick he carried.

But Mai—sweet, pretty Mai, with a face of sunshine and eyes like stars—she was watching Kit, earnestly.

"Kit, you are not offended at me—you're only just a little hurt? Isn't that it?" she asked, still keeping her little hand upon his arm.

He looked down into her face soberly.

"Did I say I was either pained or offended, little sweetheart?"

"No, but you acted so. I don't want you to get offended with me," and he fancied her lip quivered a trifle.

"Pooh! of course I won't. Associate with the poet as much as you like. I shall not care. How do you like my scheme here?"

"Oh! you're just glorious, Kit! I am so proud of you! Why, everybody is talking about you!"

"What do they say about me?" and he smiled quizzingly.

"Why, they say you are the most wonderful fellow they ever saw, Kit!"

"Maybe they ain't seen me, yet—not all. But, there's your escort, Mai, feeling as awkward as a salt-water crab in a fryingpan. I will excuse you, as it is a shame to keep the poor fellow in suspense."

"Oh! then you are tired of my company, eh?" with a pout.

"You know better than that, Mai. But you really must excuse me just now, considering how busy I am. The men will have a livery stable built, instead of a hotel, if I don't watch out."

"Oh! then certainly I will not detain you. Perhaps I may see you to-night."

"You are not going *there* again?" and he nodded toward Tim Flannigan's, which immediately joined one side of the new hotel.

"Yes, Kit. It's our bread and butter, you know. Papa is off again; I suppose on a spree."

"How long *need* you follow that vocation, Mai? It is for you to answer!"

"I don't really understand your meaning, sir!" A trifle of color arose to her cheek, and her eyes flashed.

"Oh! well, if you haven't the slightest idea—there! the boys are yelling for me; excuse me, please!"

Mai went back to Mr. Milton.

A red spot glowed on either cheek; there was a strange intensity to her gaze. Then a softening of the glance and expression followed—as though a sentiment of disbelief had followed a fancied injury.

Did she hear what Milton had to say to her? Perhaps! She answered him, at any rate, but it was mechanically, rather than interestedly.

It was only when she saw Kit looking at her, occasionally, that her pretty face lighted up gloriously.

Mr. Milton, evidently, did not enjoy the situation. Perhaps it was not *poetical* enough to suit his refined taste?

At any rate, he presently proposed that they return to the cabin.

"Very well!" Mai assented, quietly. "This hammering does make one almost distracted."

A faint smile curved his lip, but she did not notice it, nor did he speak.

When they reached the cabin, she went within doors, while he sat down on the doorstep.

"Your father has not returned," he observed, lighting a cigar.

"No. I knew he would not, once he got hold of that nugget. He will not see a sober minute until he has squandered the last of its value."

"Would you like that nugget back, Miss Roulere?"

"Why?"

"Because I would be pleased to try and procure it for you."

"But I would not accept it from you."

"Indeed! Why not?"

"Because it was a present to me from another. Mr. Milton?"

"Miss Roulere?" severely.

"What did you come here for—what mission brought you?" she abruptly demanded.

"Well—well—I—I—"

"Shall I tell you, sir?"

"Yes, tell me!"

"Well, sir, you came here expecting to find me hand-free and heart-free—a pretty, susceptible girl of seventeen, with no better sense than to fall in love with the first good-looking fellow who came along, supposing that one would be yourself; you expected to find a mere child to deal with—and, furthermore, sir, it was understood that my father was to help along your suit. You found your child, sir; for I am comparatively but a child, but I have more sense than some girls. But, Mr. Milton, not wishing to offend you, let me tell you this: I shall try to do everything to make your visit pleasant, but—you came just a little *too late*!"

CHAPTER VII.

MAI'S "FAREWELL" NIGHT.

By the way the men worked at the Denver Sport's building, a looker-on might form an approximate idea of how young mining-cities spring up so suddenly in the West.

The men had been offered liberal wages, and they seemed imbued with a resolution to do the best they knew how, for the young speculator.

During the afternoon, Kit dropped into the Shebang, and found Tim Flannigan, himself, behind the bar—a burly, good-natured Irishman, of thirty.

At the time the saloon had no other occupants, and at Kit's entrance, Tim looked up with a grin, from a letter he was reading, as if an intruder was especially welcome, at the moment.

"Gude-afternoon, me son! Troth an' it's a bit of gude luck I'm in, so 'tis. Yez be the young gint what be raisin' the devil around, intirely?"

"I'm thet same, I presume," Kit responded, dryly.

"Well, thin, I'll tell yez: I've been after thryin' ter git a swate paice av calico, down in St. Louis, named Katy McBride, but she was as shy as a fox av me. But yez can bet I coorted her by mail, wid patience, an' at last she has consented to become Mrs. Timothy Flannigan, if I'll be afther l'avin' to go to St. Louis, at onc't. Howly fathers! phat joy! Come, me boy, take a dhrink an' congratulate me!"

"Well, Timothy, I ginerally drink cigars, fer mine, but bein's this is wi' you, I'll sample a little of your best sherry."

"Av coorse ye will—av coorse ye will! Och! me boy, will yez jist think av the luck I have? Sure, by tha powers, it's mesilf will start for Saint Louis, by sunrise, the morrow."

"But who will take care of yer bizness?"

"To the deuce wid tha whisky! I've hed me fill of it, an' made me pile, too, an' now it's me wife I'm wantin'."

"Perhaps I can buy you out then, and connect the two establishments?" Kit suggested.

"Shure an' av coorse ye kin. Make me an offer for it, an' I'll jump the avenin' stage, so I will!"

"I'll give you two hundred dollars for everything, jest as she stands!"

"Sold! Be forkin' over yer cash, an' I'll write tha receipt!"

In ten minutes the Shebang belonged to Kit Bricktop, and Fat Fred presided in his accustomed place, behind the bar.

About sunset, a placard in front of the Shebang, contained the following announcement which was one that was perused over and over again by the *habitués* of the place, who had a lively interest in all that appertained thereto,

'THE OLYMPIC RESORT'

ENTIRE NEW MANAGEMENT.

FLANNIGAN MAKES HIS PILE AND RETIRES.

TO-NIGHT!

Positively Last Appearance Here, of Played-Out's Favorite Songstress and

Banjoist,

MLLE. MAI!"

This had been arranged by Kit, the Denver Sport.

He felt positive that the retirement of Mai from the stage would cause considerable dissatisfaction, but he was determined she should not thus expose herself, when the camp was now sure to fill up with all kinds of characters, who had in the long run more respect for a dog than for a woman.

How she would take it he had no idea, but he felt sure that if he could see her, to explain, it would be all right.

By dusk, the new hotel was inclosed, but of course lacked doors, windows and furniture, for all of which Kit had sent an order to Loadville, that day.

As soon as it was dark, he mounted a horse, which he had purchased, and managed to ride away from the camp, without being observed.

This was just what he wanted to do.

He was aware that he was regarded rather suspiciously by several, who had bought stocks of him. Should he openly ride out of camp at night, he had very little doubt but that an attempt would be made to stop him, by those who would fear it was his intention to escape, with what money he had received from the sale of the stocks.

Down the gulch, a couple of miles, grew, in bountiful profusion, a most magnificent variety of wild flowers.

To this spot he rapidly rode, and here spent a half-hour in plucking a bouquet of such blossoms as were most desirable to the view and smell.

When he had finished he had a large floral offering, in the shape of a basket, which for beauty and perfume would have been difficult, indeed, to excel, and in any Eastern conservatory would have cost dearly.

Equipped with this, he rode back to the saloon, and gave it to Fat Fred, instructing him to present it to Mai that evening, at the conclusion of her performance, without betraying the giver's name.

He then retired to his room.

That night was Mai's farewell night.

It was on every tongue.

Old miners looked sober, and said it wasn't a right thing for Denver Kit to deprive them of a part of their nightly enjoyment. Some of the miners even put on a clean shirt, and brushed out their tangled beards, in honor of the occasion.

The evening stages brought in big loads from either direction. Hearing the report of Played-Out's probable great future, the passengers mostly stopped off, so that at an early hour in the evening the Olympic was crowded uncomfortably full of people, who drank, smoked, and waited for the last appearance of Mlle. Mai, as was announced.

Kit did not present himself until about time for Mai to appear, when he worked his way well toward the stage, where he stood leaning against the wall, so that he could command a view of the audience.

Some of the crowd were getting pretty noisy, but he had a revolver within handy reach, and was resolved to summarily check any disturbance that might be commenced.

Lawton Leech occupied a seat near the front, and was finely attired, even to a silk hat, and a bunch of flowers in his coat.

He also held a bouquet of flowers in his hand, and while gazing at him, Kit saw him take what he judged to be a hundred-dollar bill from his pocket and stick it down among the flowers.

A faint smile wreathed Kit's lips, for he had already prepared his offering, on a much more liberal scale.

Byron Milton was not present, nor was Big Blacksnake.

Kit had wondered, several times during the day, what had become of the ruffian.

At last the bell tinkled, and Mai, attired the same as on the previous night, made her appearance.

She made her courtesy and became seated; then Fat Fred was heard from his position upon a chair:

"Gentlemen, I'll interdooce ter ye Mademoiselle Mai, the celebrated banjoist, and I wish to announce that this is her last appearance upon this stage, the new management having considered it best to do away with the entertainment until this place can be elaborately remodeled and refitted. The mam'selle being a most worthy young lady, you that have money are requested to make her a liberal donation at the conclusion, and I wish to request the best of attention and behavior."

Mai had not learned of her proposed "retirement."

Kit realized this as he saw her start and turn slightly pale when Fat Fred announced that it was her last appearance.

She instantly composed herself, however, and as soon as Fred was done, struck off into one of the ballads she knew to be a favorite with the miners.

Not once during the song did she look at Kit, although he was well satisfied that she knew exactly where he stood.

During the applause which followed her first song, she gave him a passing glance, but her face betrayed no sign of recognition.

Biting his lip with vexation, while his heart beat painfully, he turned abruptly and left the audience, and remained out of her sight during the rest of the performance in the front part of the saloon.

At last her fourth piece was finished, there was uproarious applause, a hail-storm of coins upon the stage; then, after a moment, the movement of the audience warned Kit that she had left the stage.

What was it that prompted him to leave the saloon and steal to a point where he could watch her pass on her way to her home?

It would be hard to tell.

Boy love, as well as any other love, has many curious freaks.

He had not long to wait.

She soon came along, and Mr. Byron Milton walked beside her, though she did not have hold of his arm.

"You are a beautiful singer, Miss Roulere," he was saying. "You have a voice of wonderful compass, which, with a little training would make an instant hit upon an operatic stage in New York."

"Do you think so? I have often wondered if I should ever see that famous city."

"How I should love to show you around the dear old city, Miss Mai. 1—"

Then their words became too indistinct to understand.

"Yes, and how I should like to have the pleasure of seeing you booted from here to Boston!" Kit muttered aloud.

"And here, too, younker. Ha! ha! ha!"

And Lawton Leech loomed up before him.

"Hello! what are you up to?" Kit demanded, in surprise.

"The very same racket you are. D'ye know, younker, what that cursed girl did?"

"No. Haven't the slightest idea!"

"Well, sir, she accepted a big basket o' flowers what Fat Fred gave to her, and threw mine back in my face!"

"She did? haw! haw! haw! Give ye ther glove right afore the boys, eh? Haw! haw! haw! haw! That's too rich fer ter swaller! Whoop-ee-e-e-e! haw! haw! haw! haw!"

And Kit roared till his sides ached.

"Shet up, you fool!" Leech growled, shaking the youth by the shoulder. "Now, lookee you here. You an' I's 'bout square. We've both got left. So be sensible. I ain't sech a bad sort of fellow, boy. I've got some money, and I reckon I occasionally feel my oats a little. My opinion of you ain't so bad as et was. I see you don't scare for a cent's worth of dried apples! That's what I like! Now, d'ye know what I'm goin' ter do?"

"Nary!"

"Well, there's goin' to be fun. Who sent that basket of flowers?"

"How d'ye 'spect me to know anything about it? Go ask Fred!"

"So I will! Oh! I know well enough it was

that cuss they call a poet. I'll poet him! I'm just going to take a shingle off from his roof to-morrow—not to-night!"

"How do you mean?"

"Why, I'll tell you. We both got left, eh? I bein' the biggest, it's my business to put a nose on the poet!"

"Well?"

"Ye see I'm somethin' of a knocker, myself, though no one don't know it about here. I'm jest goin' down thar, an' put a nose on the poet!"

"Better wait 'til to-morrow!"

"No sech a thing!"

And away toward the saloon, did Lawton Leech stride.

Kit followed.

"Let him go. I've a notion the poet kin handle hisself. I wonder if the lunkhead, Fred, will know enough to not give me away!" he muttered.

By keeping up to the speculator, he managed to enter the Olympic directly behind him, and catching the eye of the ponderous bartender, he gave him the wink.

Be it said to his credit, Fred was a very wide-awake individual, and he at once comprehended that something was up, so to speak.

Lawton Leech strode up to the bar, with an aspect dark enough to chill the blood in the veins of a cougar.

"Look here, you slop-slinger!" he cried; "you took that basket of flowers to the singer, didn't you?"

"I did!" Fat Fred replied, graciously.

"I thought so. Now will you be kind enough to tell me who sent them flowers to the girl?"

"No, sir. Couldn't tell you, sir. Some kid brought them in, and said I was to give 'em to Ma'm'selle Mai!"

"What kid?"

"Got me again, sir. Some younker belongin' 'bout the camp!"

"That settles it. The cursed poet did it. Come along, now, boys, an' see ther fun, fer there's music in the air!" he cried, turning and leaving the saloon.

Of course the crowd followed.

They would not have been true "men of the West," if they had not. If there was to be a "circus," they meant to see it, and enjoy the performance.

The night was beautifully moonlight, it lacking but one night of being full moon.

A crisp, but pleasant breeze blew down the gulch, and the atmosphere was so pure that objects could be clearly discerned at a considerable distance.

A rather suggestive appearance was that of the crowd as they surged along, Lawton Leech in the lead.

Kit, the Denver Sport, followed, but kept at the rear, for he was hardly sure whether he cared to be seen or not.

There was still a gleam of light visible through a crack in the shutters, when the vicinity of the Roulere shanty was reached.

The crowd paused, some little distance away, while Lawton went on, and rapped upon the door.

It was at once opened, and by young Milton, himself.

"What's wanted?" he demanded.

"You're wanted! Are you the feller they call the poet?" Leech demanded.

"I am a poet, sir, after a fashion."

Without further argument, Leech aimed a terrific blow at the young stranger's face.

But, lo! and behold, it never touched him, being neatly parried by his left arm.

At the same time, his right fist shot forward, struck Leech on the forehead, like a sledge-hammer, and landed him on the ground, upon his back.

"Yes, I'm the poet! Did you wish to see me?" Milton cried, stepping out into the moonlight.

CHAPTER VIII.

THE POET ON HIS MUSCLE.

"Ah!—um! Talk about yer Moses! Sing glory halleluyer!" quoth Kit, as the speculator went tumbling to the ground. "Ef thet weren't done up as purty an' sweet as crab-apple custard, I'll eat my last year's ulster. Hol hol how Lawty *did* drop!"

His remarks were partly addressed to the nearest person to him, who chanced to be Morton Miles, who, with his companion Slensby, had been attracted to the scene.

"What is the trouble?" Mr. Miles condescended to ask.

"Oh, nothin'; only a luv affair. Three gal-loots arter one gal, an' one on 'em got so despirit that he came down to lick blazes out of his rival. The rival, as ye jest obsarved, happened to be ter hum when Number One arrived."

Lawton Leech had by this time staggered to his feet, swearing like a trooper, and found the poet watching him with rather an amused expression.

Mai Roulere and her father had come to the door, the old gent being so full of whisky that it was necessary for him to cling to the doorpost for support.

"See here, curse you!" Leech blustered; "what d'ye mean by hitting a gentleman in that way?"

"I wasn't aware I had hit one," was the dry retort.

"Oh, ye wasn't, hey? So I suppose I am not a gentleman?"

"I should judge not; from your rather eccentric behavior, a moment ago, I think you are a ruffianly loafer."

"And I suppose you count yourself a gentleman."

"I always endeavor to conduct myself as one, sir."

"Well, you ain't nothing of the kind. You are a low-lived, cringing puppy. You are a coward and a sneak, and I've come here to mash your nose all over your baby face!"

"You have?"

"Yes, I have!"

"What cause have you had for offense at me, sir, may I ask?"

"Cause enough. I don't allow no person to step in ahead of me in my love affairs. Oh, we've got it in for you—young Kit and I. We see'd ye escortin' Mai Roulere home, you bet;

and arter I've half-killed you, Kit he's going to finish the job!"

Kit was mad enough to have kicked the excited speculator with a vengeance.

Here he was drawn into the muss, when he most wanted to be left out.

What would Mai think of him?

What mattered it *what* she thought?

Such were the thoughts that flashed quickly across his mind.

Something must be done.

Before Milton could answer, Kit stepped forward.

"You'll please not mix me up in yer fracas, Mr. Leech!" he said, "as I have nothing whatever to do with it!"

"Oh! ye'r goin' ter squeal, are you?" the speculator gritted.

"Not a bit of it. I am in no way connected with your doings. If I have any differences with his nibs, the poet, I'll settle them myself, in my own way."

"Bah! I thought you had no sand! I'll polish him off, however. Look here, you swell-headed stranger, d'ye know what I'm going to do?"

"I know what you are doing, sir—making a fool of yourself!" Milton responded, standing on the alert.

"No, I ain't, but I'm going to make a fool out of you. Either you promise to pick up your heels, and trot right out of this town, at once and fer good, or you have got to stand up before me, and see who is most entitled to the company of Roulere's daughter!"

"I shall certainly choose the latter alternative, although it is the first experience of this peculiar character I ever had!" Milton said, coolly.

"Snails an' snappin' turtles! That's ther talk!" yelled Kit, waving his hat. "Ther ain't no way ter settle it but to hev a square, fair stand-up and knock-down. The feller w'ot gits knocked down most times is ther best man—ter git licked! Square off now, ye galoots! I'm master o' these hyer ceremonies, and I'm goin' ter see fair play!"

The antagonists accordingly began to spar, lightly and carefully, in order to feel for each other's weak points.

It was evident that both had taken at least a few lessons in the manly art, and in the beginning, it was pretty hard to form an opinion which would score the victory.

Both were pretty fairly matched, in point of size, weight and apparent strength, and the indications were, that there would be a very equal contest.

The blows of the two men gradually became more business-like, and it was easy to see that they meant to put in a "teller" when opportunity first afforded.

Thick and fast fell the blows, and as if possessed of sudden fury, Milton managed to plant nearly every other blow full in his opponent's face, while Leech could not get in a telling blow.

In a few rounds he was fairly knocked out.

Milton laughed, dryly, and turned to the crowd.

"I guess you can take your friend back to

camp, gents. I don't believe he will want any more to-night. If he does, just come down and awaken me!"

He turned then, and entered the cabin, and the door was closed.

"One rival knocked out of the field, anyhow!" Kit muttered, as he went back to the Olympic.

"Thet Milton is a pummeler, an' as I don't keer to share Leech's fate, I shall have to get onto him in some other way. Ther coast looks scaly fer my ever gettin' Mai, thet is sure as preechin'."

Several days passed—seven in all—and wrought great changes in Played-Out camp.

The new mines had been shown to the stockholders, Kit having disposed of all but his own reserve of stock, and the greatest excitement and enthusiasm prevailed, for the yield of the lode or pocket, when fully developed, promised to exceed the most sanguine expectations.

The hotel was done, fully equipped and packed with guests. The town was swarming with new arrivals; sbanties and tents had gone up, or were going up, by the dozen, and every foot of ground for miles around the new city was being prospected.

It was indeed a mining boom in earnest, and a strong force of men were working night and day at opening the Bricktop Mine.

But where is this mine?

In order to fully explain we shall need to make a retrogression in the main thread of our story, which may prove as acceptable here as elsewhere.

A couple of days before his arrival in Played-Out, Kit was riding through a wild mountain gorge, five or six miles south of Played-Out, when he suddenly rounded a bend and came upon a scene that aroused his indignation.

A burly, wolfish-looking ruffian was battling with an aged and decrepit hag, whose hair was white and tangled, and garments a mass of rags and patches.

The hag was keeping the ruffian at bay by desperately wielding a sort of staff she carried, but it was evident her strength was fast sailing.

Drawing his revolver, Kit blazed away at the ruffian, who at once took to flight, most likely from the fact that the bullet had crippled his right arm.

When Kit rode up to the old woman he was overwhelmed with thanks, and was surprised to find that she had at one time been a lady of good education. She pressed Kit to accompany her to her cave habitation in the mountains, and as night and a fierce storm were coming on, he accepted the invitation.

While *en route*, the old woman, who gave her name as Martha, explained that she was alone, and had so been for years.

On arrival at the cave, Kit found it to be a really cozy place of abode.

Martha prepared a tempting meal of venison and root tea, and Kit did full justice to it.

While making his toilet before the repast, he had rolled up his sleeves, and the hermitess saw upon his left arm a peculiar red mark, which looked as though it might have been burnt there, in the shape of a figure 3.

Gazing at it strangely for a moment, the wo-

man suddenly dropped upon her knees, and seemed to be uttering a silent prayer.

Kit was astonished, but withheld his curiosity as well as he could.

When Martha arose she said:

"Did I act strangely? If so, pardon me. I have such spells occasionally."

Kit was not satisfied that it was a "spell," but he did not really like to say so.

It struck him as being very curious that this strange woman should be so suddenly affected by the red mark on his arm.

After supper she said:

"You are a nice boy. I am sure of it, and I can do well by you. Where are you going?"

"I thought some of taking in Thunderville!" he answered.

"Bah! don't go there. You stop at Played-Out! Will you?"

"Well, I suppose I might, if there's anything in it."

"There is a fortune in it for you."

"No!"

"I say yes. What are you doing here in the wild West?"

"Oh, knocking around. Once in a while I get a chance to use this."

And turning up the collar of his jacket he exposed a detective's badge.

Her eyes sparkled with pleasure.

"Capital!" she cried; "it could not be better. What do you think of these?"

She brought a willow basket, containing a dozen or more large nuggets of gold!

"Beauties, ain't they?" she chuckled. "Now, I am getting well on toward my grave, and gold is nothing to me. You are a nice young man; I know you; but don't ask me about yourself now. It's a long, long story, and you shall eventually know it. But first of all—*business!* How would you like to own a mine of gold that would make you rich for life?"

"Waal, I might rope it in, providing I got it on the square!" Kit declared.

"You are honest, then?"

"Ginerally try to be, I reckon."

"Good idea. Would to God everybody was the same."

Then she was silent for a moment.

"Yes, it can be arranged; now listen: Years upon years ago there lived in the South a rich family. This family had a confidential servant, who, in turn, had a wife. I speak briefly, because a few words will convey my meaning."

"This servant's name was Paul Vermilye, and he was, by nature born, the veriest wretch that ever lived. His wife was a pretty and refined girl, but he treated her, after they were a year married, on the same principle as a slave-master treats his slaves—like a brute. Not long after their marriage, say two years, Paul became enamored of an orphan girl, who, with her baby brother, was the heiress of a fortune. Resolved to marry her, at all hazards, he took his own trusting wife on a pleasure-trip, and murdered her. At least, he supposed he did, and does not know to the contrary, to this day."

"It seems that he had succeeded in accomplishing the ruin of this other girl, named Marion Mancill, and had, as he calculated, that

hold upon her. But there came a crash—the trustee of the Mancill estate had embezzled and incumbered both money and other property, and then absconded—and Marion was literally a beggar. Vermilye now refused to marry her, and the poor girl committed suicide. Vermilye then fled the State.

"I might take up another thread of a strange tale at this point, but will wait, till another time."

"Vermilye's wife did not die. After a long time, she recovered. She never forgot the attempt he made to suffocate her, with pillows, in the St. Charles Hotel, at New Orleans. She swore revenge. She tracked him everywhere, waiting for the time to come. *It has come now!*"

"What! are you, then, his wife?" Kit cried, in astonishment.

"I am—I am Ellen Vermilye, formerly Paul Vermilye's wife—for, do you suppose I would own that wretch for a husband? Oh, no!"

"I should ker-smile not!" Kit agreed.

"Well, to proceed," pursued the hermitess:

"Paul Vermilye lives in Played-Out. He owns a tract of land on which this gold-mine I speak of, is located. He has no idea the mine exists, but hangs on to the claim with dogged persistency. He will not sell it. He is a drunken vagabond. That tract must belong to you—do you hear, to *you!*"

"How so? I wouldn't care to get it, by dishonesty."

"You need not. It is as much mine as it is his. You are to get it, sure. If he refuses to sell it to you, you can force him to, by threatening to give him up to the law. D'ye see?"

"I reckon I tumble to the racket. But is it square and honest?"

"It is. He is a sot. Every farthing he gets, carries him further down to destruction. That mine shall be yours!"

All night they conversed, and compared notes and plans. The next day Kit took leave, and in due time arrived in Played-Out.

Martha had told him Vermilye went under the assumed name of Roth Roulere.

But, she had failed to mention Mai.

CHAPTER IX.

HOW KIT SCORED A TEN-STRIKE.

Two days after the fight between Byron Milton and Lawton Leech, Kit Bricktop sat in his private office in the new hotel, pondering over some plans he had in view, and considering that he must at once get old Roulere into his power, in order that he could open the mine, when there came a clumsy rap at the door, and it was opened by old Roulere himself, who entered at a rather unsteady gait.

An expression of disgust shot athwart Kit's features.

"Shut the door and sit down!" he ordered, sharply. "What do you want?"

"Ye needn't be so sassy!" the bummer grunted, getting into a chair, finally. "I ain't no bug-bear that will bite ye. Ner old Roulere ain't drunk to-day, either. D'ye know the reason why?"

"Because you have no collat' to get whisky with, eh?"

"No. I've got a few bits left, but Fred won't sell me nothin'."

"Correct. That's according to my orders. I want you to sober up, Roulere. I've got something to say to you."

"Ye hev? About the gal, I suppose?"

"No!" and Kit frowned. He had met Mai but once since the fight, and then she barely nodded to him. "It's concerning yourself, Roulere."

"Oh! That's a different thing. I thort of 'twas about the gal, 'twarn't no use at all—no use at all! She's dead gone on the poet. Jest see'd 'em awhile ago, up gulch, on a flowery knoll. She was lookin' over his shoulder, an' he was reading poetry to her!"

Kit compressed his lips, to keep from saying something he ought not.

"What do you suppose I care about their affairs?" he demanded. "It's business I'm looking to. Roulere, I want to buy your claim."

"Ye do? What fer?"

"To get more building space, for one thing, and besides, I think the sand might pan out a few dollars."

"I won't sell. That settles that!"

"Why not?"

"Because I *won't*."

"But, look here. You are poor, and getting old. Wouldn't the money do you more good than the land?"

"No. Ef I got the money it would all go for w-whisky!"

"Oh! well, of course, that's none of my business. How many acres is there?"

"Twenty."

"Twenty? It would fetch about two hundred an acre on the market—say, at best five thousand dollars!"

"Leech couldn't buy it at that!"

"Well, now, see here. I'll double it—ten thousand, spot cash!"

"No. Won't sell!"

"But I say you will!"

Kit spoke positively.

"Humph! Mebbe you know more about it than I do."

"I do. I've offered you a big price. You will sell to me."

"Danged if I do!"

"How old are you, Roulere?"

"Sixty-five."

"Good age! A man must have some queer dreams when he gets that old, eh?"

Roulere started.

"What d'ye mean?" he growled.

"Oh, nothing! The fact is, old man, it's a pretty hard sight to see the spindling shanks of an aged man like you dangling from the gal-lows!"

The old wretch started, and glared at his tormentor in terror.

"What do you mean?" he gasped again.

"I mean, Paul Vermilye, that I am a detective, and you are my prisoner. You are wanted for *wife murder* in New Orleans! The telltale pillows shall be your bed in a prison-cell until you hang!"

The terrified wretch burst into a whining cry.

"Don't—*don't*!" he implored. "Oh, sir! don't take me back there, I beg! I am so old! My life is short, at best. Spare me, I pray!"

And he sobbed aloud, his hands covering his face.

The accusation had struck home!

"You deserve hanging!" Kit went on. "You had no mercy on your wife, Ellen, and you were the cause of Miss Mancill's suicide. You are a vile wretch, Paul Vermilye!"

"I know—I know! But, pray, do not give me up! I will do anything for you: I will be your slave. I will try to induce Mai to marry you."

"Bah! she is a coquette. I despise her! See here, Roulere—will you sell me your claim for what I promised, if I do not arrest you for murder?"

"Willingly—willingly!"

"Where is the deed?"

"I always keep it in my pocket."

"Then, come. Here is a Leadville stage outside. We will go and settle the business at once."

The old man did not object.

He seemed palsied with terror.

Kit made a few preparations, and they entered the stage.

The next day in Leadville the ownership of the claim changed hands, and Vermilye received ten thousand dollars with the understanding that he was to go back to Played-Out and give Mai one-half of it.

On their return to Played-Out, Kit visited the lucky spot (where, by Martha's direction, he had found the nugget in the bed of a little creek) with the stockholders.

A little digging exposed a valuable vein of quartz rock.

Here was where he had found the nuggets—here was the key to Played-Out's future.

Thus, was he cleared of all anxiety in regard to his success—which brings us up to the point where we began the retrogression.

CHAPTER X.

KIT SCORES A DOUBLE.

Kit's hotel had been named the La Belle.

Whether he named it that because Mai had been called La Belle, or not, he hardly knew, for, in fact, he had seen the little elf of the gulch but three times since Lawton Leech's defeat, and then, it was simply at nodding distance.

He was aware, however, that Byron Milton was very attentive to her, by an occasional remark, he caught from the miners, and concluded of course that Mai was receiving his addresses with pleasure.

"Why should I care?" he would reason, when his thoughts reverted to her, and a twinge of jealousy would assail him. "She is better fitted for him than for me, for he has education and culture that I never was troubled with. Then, too, I am young, and by no means poor, and have lots of time to find a wife—perhaps one I could like better."

Yet, try as he would, he could not banish pretty, piquant Mai from his mind.

Old Roulere, as we may as well continue to call him, had told one truth, if he never had

told another; he had said he would squander the money on drink, and he was keeping his word, like a man.

As he could not get liquor at the Olympic, he went daily to Thunderville, by stage, and procured the fiery stuff by quarts. Consequently, he was in a beastly state of intoxication, all the time.

Kit was no longer the rough-appearing fellow that he had been when he first set foot in Played-Out, for, although his picturesque style of dress was unchanged, every article of his make-up was of the finest material, as became one of his wealthy position.

Mai Roulere was not, now, the only attractive girl in the camp, for many miners had brought their families, in which were several pretty girls.

Kit was certainly the big man of the town, and it wasn't a wonder that he became a target for many a pretty pair of eyes.

More out of desperation it was, that he got acquainted with these girls. He wanted Mai to know that she wasn't the only *catch* in the world.

And the intended shaft evidently reached its mark, for one afternoon, toward sunset, as Kit sat in his pleasant private office, reading an Eastern paper, a boy entered, and gave him a delicately-perfumed letter, and then bowed himself out.

Kit at once surmised who it was from, and opened it more out of curiosity than actual interest.

It was written in a delicate chirography, and ran as follows:

"MR. KIT —:—

"DEAR SIR:—I shall be alone this evening, and would very much like to see you. MAL."

"I wonder if you would?" Kit muttered. "I've half a notion to be ungentlemanly enough to deny you the privilege of my society, Miss Roulere!"

Upon further consideration, however, he decided to go.

"I wonder where the poet will be?" he mused. "Something queer about it, I'll agree. Something queer 'bout that aire Lawton Leech, too. He's as quiet as a mice since he got his face fixed up and is about again. They say still waters run deep, an' that's my opinion of Leechy. He's layin' around quiet, waitin' fer a chance to get square wi' Milton. Saw Big Blacksnake in camp yesterday, talkin' wi' Leech, an' it struck me purty forcibly then that thar was somethin' up."

About an hour after dark, Kit beheld Byron Milton in the office of the hotel, engaged in close conversation with the Mr. Slensby who came to Played-Out with Morton Miles.

Kit watched them until they went up-stairs together, then he scratched his head and gave vent to a prolonged whistle.

Just what idea occurred to him we will not attempt to guess, but there was rather a wise expression upon his face as he lit a cigar and sauntered toward the Roulere cabin.

Mai was sitting in the doorway when he reached it, and at once made room for him beside her.

"I am so glad you came, Mr.—Mr.— Won't you please tell me your real name?"

"Kit."

"But what else?"

"Bricktop."

"Oh, now, I know better! Whoever heard of such a name as Bricktop! Haven't you really another name?"

"I don't know. As my memory sometimes wanders back, it occurs to me that I once was called Lennox; but I couldn't be positive."

"Well, then, I'll call you Mr. Lennox. I am very glad you came. I haven't had an opportunity to have a chat with you since—let me see, since— Why, how forgetful I am—"

"You probably mean since I offended you, by retiring you from the concert stage, that you might not be subjected almost nightly to insults of a horde of devil-may-care miners!"

"There, now, *don't!* I admit I was offended, a little bit at that, but have since seen how judicious a kindness you did me. So I am not a bit mad, now, am I?" and the little coquette slipped her arm around him, as though he were a part of her property.

"I judge you must have fallen out with the romantic rhymester!" Kit remarked, dryly.

"Oh! no. We've nothing to fall out about. He knows just how much I think of him, and conducts himself accordingly. Of course I have to treat him courteously, while he remains here, but I tell you it was a relief when he said he should be absent this evening."

"I suppose you will tell him the same about me?" Kit observed.

"Of course not. I like you, and I think he is sickening!"

"Indeed! And shall I tell you why you like me?"

"Yes! yes!"

"Because I am just silly enough to let you make a fool of me, when it suits your notion, and then patiently wait 'til you feel like giving me a good soft-soaping again!"

"Oh, Mr. Lennox! It isn't any such a thing. That wouldn't look nice in a young lady."

"So Miss Carlton says. She says she has a poor opinion of young ladies who will have two or three suitors at once."

Kit gave this as a poser.

"And who is Miss Carlton, pray?" Mai demanded, quickly.

"Oh! she is an estimable young lady, whose acquaintance I made the other night."

"Indeed! But come inside, Mr. Lennox. It is getting chilly out here."

She lit a lamp, and Kit entered the cabin and took a seat. After closing the door and shutters, she drew a chair near to him, and laid her hand upon his shoulder.

"Mr. Lennox, you do not act the same as you did when I first met you. Has prosperity's smile upon you wrought the change?"

"Not that I am aware of. I observe that we all gradually change, in one way or another!"

He said it so dryly that she laughed.

"You are so queer. I have not changed, have I?"

"Perhaps not?"

Just then his eyes fell upon his floral basket, which stood on the mantel.

She saw him look at it, and her eyes grew luminous as she gazed intently into his face.

"Kit—pardon me, but Mr. Lennox sounds unnatural—Kit, perhaps my demeanor has undergone a little change, for, to tell the truth, and be a goose in the bargain, I have felt somewhat hurt. That's why I may have seemed distant toward you."

"Hurt?"

"Yes, hurt!"

"Pray tell me why? Have I done anything wrong?"

"Well—well—I felt kind of hurt, anyhow. You see, it wasn't the pecuniary part of it—it was because I looked for it; because I thought you liked me!"

"You talk in riddles. Please explain!"

"Why, you see, the last night I sung, everybody just showered presents on me, mostly in money. And—and, you see, I could have cried when I found that you had forgotten me!"

It was with great effort Kit could keep from betraying his great astonishment.

"Well! how stupid in me!" he managed to utter. "Really you must forgive me, as I am but a great stupid, anyhow; and then, too, when you gave me such a withering look, it set my head on my neck upside down."

"Well, it's all over; let it pass. I saw you looking at the beautiful present I received from Mr. Milton. The flowers are faded of course; but do you not think he had rare taste in arranging them?"

"I should judge he had!"

"Yes, and what do you think? I found in among the flowers, a five-hundred-dollar note, and a solitaire diamond ring—the most beautiful I ever saw. Shall I show it to you?"

"It is hardly worth while, I guess."

"Well, anyhow, I wouldn't wear it, and Mr. Milton said it was awful mean of me!"

"He did? And you wouldn't wear it?"

"Certainly not. It wouldn't be right."

"Maybe. But, somehow Milton seems to have been gittin' his books in purty lively. So he sent you that bouquet, eh?"

"Yes!" She gazed at him searchingly.

"Why, what are you laughing at, Kit?"

"Well, eat my ears if that don't take the cake!" snorted Kit.

"What? what sir, do you mean?"

"Why, ther cheek of the thing!"

"Kit—can it be possible? Did you give it to Fred to give to me?"

"Well, George Washington-like, my dear, I should emphatically confess that I did."

To depict the surprise of Miss Mai Roulere would be quite impossible.

"Oh, Kit! Oh, dear! I don't know what to say or do. Yes, I do know! This is the first thing I'll do!" and throwing her arms about Kit, she hugged him and kissed him with passionate tenderness.

"Kit, I love you and ain't afraid to own it! If you are half as fond of me as I am of you, that is all I ask."

"If I'm not ten times more so, I am not deserving of you!" Kit answered. "Henceforth we will let no one step between us, eh, my beauty?"

"No, indeed! Oh! wait till I see that horrible—"

"Don't! don't say a word. Promise me, that by neither word or action you will betray that you know the truth!"

"Why, Kit?"

"Because, at the proper moment, I'll make him feel so cheap he won't know which foot his left shoe is worn on!"

"All right, Kit. I'll do just as you say."

"Good! Treat him respectfully, but do not give me any more jealous pangs!"

"Not a one, Kit. And, now, I want to tell you something. But, first, let's be sure. You might get jealous again. Are we engaged?"

"I am yours, if you are mine!"

"Then, it is settled, and this is the evidence beyond dispute," she laughed, as she procured the handsome ring from the basket.

Kit placed it tenderly upon her finger, and thus their troth was plighted.

When, a few minutes later, Mai raised her head from his shoulder, there were tears in her eyes.

"I am very happy, Kit," she said, "but you have taken me as I am, and may regret it. I do not know who I am."

"I do, though. I know all about it. So cheer up. In a few days, maybe sooner, I will show you your father!"

"My father, Kit? Oh! can it be true?"

"You bet it can. I've got the whole case figured out. And now, what were you going to tell me?"

"Why, I wanted to tell you that Mr. Milton asked me to become his wife, and promised me, if I would, he would tell me who my parents were, and said that I would soon have a fortune coming to me."

"Hal ha! methinks I have at last tumbled onto the missing link. I'll do all and more than he can do, my dear. You keep your sweet little mouth as tightly shut as you know how, and if Denver Kit don't astonish you, it won't be because he ain't goin' to try. I've nailed the racket once more!"

CHAPTER XI.

A SHREWD GUESS.

WE mentioned the fact of Milton's accompanying Mr. Slensby up-stairs at the hotel.

They went direct to Slensby's room.

It was small, but comfortable, and lighting a lamp, the two men sat down at a table, opposite each other.

The lamplight shining upon their faces revealed a likeness between them.

"Now, to business," Slensby said. "I've not had a chance to speak with you before, for Miles has dogged me constantly. How are you making out?"

"To tell the truth, dad, I'm making out rather poorly. The girl is artful and unmanageable. I think, however, I can see a perceptible weakening to my charms."

"Then hurry matters. It's high time something was done!"

"Why, is there any danger?"

"Yes. Miles gives every indication of having quick consumption. He may drop off in a month. As soon as you are married, why, of course we'll

contrive to fetch out the girl an' see how he makes a will. If all goes to her, so much the better. Her all must be our all!"

"Do you think the old man had any idea that she was his daughter, when she was singing?"

"Bah! no! He didn't evince any interest in her whatever."

"Well, then, all may turn out well. If that fellow Kit was out of the way, I've no idea but what I could fetch the girl to time very soon."

"I don't like the scamp myself. Have you any idea how he persuaded Vermilye to sell?"

"I have had an idea that he might know about Vermilye's past life."

"Pooh! a boy like him? Nonsense."

"He's a shrewd one. He worked into a fortune with remarkable shrewdness, and resurrected life in this town!"

"That may be. A little Yankee foresight can accomplish much."

"Well, anyhow the boy worked some powerful spring on the old man, or he never would have got the land."

"Maybe so. Wouldn't Vermilye tell what it was?"

"No. He's been paralyzed drunk ever since. He'll die of snakes within a week."

"Hope he does! He never was any good. Keep steadily at the girl. Remember the alternative staring you in the face!"

The next day dawned bright, warm and clear, and to Kit the morning seemed one of the most beautiful he had ever seen.

And to him, why should it not be?

The night before Mai had promised to become his bride, at any time he might set, and he felt as though he ought to be the happiest of mortals.

Everything at the mines was working well, under the direction of an able superintendent and his bosses, and their being nothing particular to do, at the office, the boy made up his mind to pay a visit to old Martha, the mountain hermitess.

That the strange old woman knew something of his early life, Kit felt sure, and he meant, if possible, to learn what it was.

Locking up the office he passed through the hotel, to enter the saloon, when he encountered Mr. Miles.

The gentleman was looking haggard, and rather hollow-eyed, as if his peace of mind was seriously disturbed.

At sight of Kit he bowed, and beckoned to him.

Rather reluctantly the boy followed him to a seat.

"Excuse me, if I am interrupting you in your business," Miles said, "but I would like to speak with you a moment."

"I am at your command, sir, so do not hesitate to say what you wish," Kit replied, courteously.

"Well, it isn't very much," Mr. Miles said, with a feeble smile. "I have received—it was some days ago—a letter, on a matter of importance to me, signed by a person whom I do not know. The letter came from this camp, and I

believe the writer signed an anonymous name to deceive me. Have you ever heard of a person here called 'Old Oxford?'"

"No! To tell the truth, sir, I don't know such a person."

"Have you *heard* such a name or *seen* such a name, since coming here?"

"When I come to think of it, sir, it strikes me I have seen the name, but in what ~~metimes~~ I am hardly prepared to say, for a ~~page~~ was now."

"You have seen the name; of that I ~~am~~ I am was Miles's confident assertion. ~~An oppor-~~

"Ah, have I? Perhaps you will exp—let man and where?"

"I chanced to see a specimen of your chirography, and compared it with that in the letter. The resemblance was too close for there to be any mistake. You wrote that letter. I am satisfied of it."

"Well, Mr. Miles, you are right. I did write the letter, and am perfecting the plans for the restoration of your child."

"Boy! what nonsense is this you are telling me?"

Mr. Miles had arisen, and was greatly excited.

"Be calm, sir. It is no nonsense I am telling you. I am doing as I said. To-night, if all works well, you shall see your child."

"Great God be blessed! Can it be possible my long search is to be rewarded?" and the gentleman wept.

"Be calm, sir, or you will attract attention," Kit warned, calmly. "There is one thing you must candidly promise me."

"What is it?"

"You must promise me not to breathe a word or a hint of what has passed between us to a living soul. Do you understand?"

"Not even to Slensby?"

"Not even to Slensby!"

"But, my dear boy, Slensby has been my boon companion for years. He is my second cousin."

"And, Mr. Miles, take a fool's advice. If I ain't a considerable way off my base, Slensby is a rascal of the first water who is playing you for all you are worth! Remember, I just give you that as an eye-opener, and don't intend it to go any further."

"I understand, but you are surely mistaken in your estimation of Slensby. However, as you wish it, I'll keep quiet."

Kit entered the saloon, leaving Morton Miles a very astonished man, and lighting a cigar, he ordered his horse and was soon riding away rapidly.

CHAPTER XII.

STRANGE REVELATIONS.

As the Denver Sport dashed by Lawton Leech's cabin, that worthy and Big Blacksnake were standing in the doorway.

"Curse that young sprout!" Leech gritted. "How I hate him! He has jumped up into riches and popularity in a day almost. I allus did hate fellers wi' sech cussed luck. Then, too, I've got it in fer him on account of the gal."

"Yas, an' hyer's w'at's got it in fer 'im, too!" Blacksnake growled. "The little scab made me

take water like as ef I'd fell in a creek—me ther bristlin' b'ar-faced bouncer o' Brighamville. But, I say, ain't it 'most time to likker?"

"Not a drop! D'ye hear! There's work to do to-night, and you let liquor be till we get clear!"

"All right, boss!"

mean time, Kit continued on his way, its varying from sweet Mai to the mis- re him. In due time he reached the f the mountain cave, and in view of wrong?" d Martha a surprise, he made his ap- "Well, cautiously, and bounded into the cave abrup-

What he saw, however, caused him to pause in amazement.

Upon the hard stone floor of the cave lay a man, bound hand and foot, and struggling and rolling his eyes in the throes of a fit.

Two women were bending over him, watching him with pained expressions of countenance.

One was the hermitess; the other was a woman with long hair of the purest silvery color, worn loose down her back. Her face had once been beautiful, and was not even now homely, although there were lines here and there which spoke of past trouble. Her eyes were of a hazel hue but very penetrating in their glance.

She was dressed in a flowing wrapper, and her neat appearance was strangely in contrast with that of Martha.

When she saw Kit, she uttered a strange cry, partly as of recognition, and took a step toward him.

"Your name—your name!" she gasped, clasping her hands in appealing eagerness.

"Christofer Bricktop, at yer service, from Denver!" Kit replied, not knowing whether to grin, or be frightened.

"Jessiel go sit down!" Martha commanded, sharply. "I am ashamed of you!"

The white-haired woman mechanically obeyed, but kept staring at Kit in a way that made him feel decidedly nervous.

Who was she? Was she crazy?

If so, and the man had fits, Kit judged that the old hermitess must run a sort of an asylum.

"You will excuse her," Martha said, addressing the boy. "Don't mind anything she says, for I believe her mind is becoming a little shattered. This poor fellow, too, is becoming all most unmanageable when he has a fit. I have only seen him a couple of times, lately, but I know him well."

Kit stepped forward, and took a good look at the man, only to utter an exclamation of astonishment as he did so.

It was the same man, Mike Malone, whom he had prevented from committing suicide at the Shebang in Played-Out!

"You have seen him, then?" Martha asked, eagerly.

"Wal, I should smile. Wanted ter blow his brains out the other night down in the camp, but I advised him ter hang on to what he had for fear he might need 'em. I took him fer a sort of a crank, you see!"

"Well, to tell the truth, he isn't far short of it."

"Who is he?"

"You remember the Mancill girl I told you of? Well, this is her brother, Theodore. He was then a mere child!"

Kit whistled.

"I see—I see!" he said. "The fate of his sister has made him a wreck."

"Exactly. He has but one object, when rational. That is revenge."

"On Vermilye?"

"Yes, on Paul Vermilye! Do you know where the hell-bound is?"

It was not Martha who spoke, but young Mancill. He had recovered from the fit, and was glaring steadily at Kit.

"I reckon you'll ask of some one that knows the man," Kit replied, with an attempt to turn it off.

"Oh, I'll find him—I'll find him, and cut his heart out. I just saw him in my fit. He is in Played-Out. Let me loose, old woman!"

Martha had turned white, but she cut the cords that bound him.

"Be careful, sir; you may get a fit again!" she said anxiously.

"Oh, yes, I'll get a fit," he chuckled exultantly; "but it will be in a pine box, and that, too, after Paul Vermilye is food for the buzzards!"

Then, with a wild laugh, he dashed from the cave.

"He told the truth. He saw Vermilye in his dream, and poor Paul's fate is settled!" Martha observed.

A tear rolled down her furrowed cheek, but she wiped it away, as if ashamed of her weakness.

"What did you come for?" she demanded, a moment later.

"I came to hear the other part of the story. Martha, you have seen what I have done for Played-Out?"

"I have, and proud I am of you. I was there, unknown to any one."

"Martha, I want you to tell me one thing. Is Mai Roulere the lost child of Morton Miles? I need scarcely ask the question, because I am positive of it!"

"How?"

"I am possessed of papers that charge Paul Vermilye with having stolen the child, and you have said Paul Vermilye and Roth Roulere were one—er, in fact, it has been clearly proven so."

"Yes, my boy, Mai Roulere is rightfully Minnie Miles. Her own father is now in Played-Out."

"You have seen him?"

"I have."

"Well, that settles that. Mai Roulere is to be the future Mrs. Christofer Bricktop."

"You don't say! You have made a wise choice, boy, for she is like her mother, she is an angel."

"Bet she is! And now, Martha, who am I? You know me—I beg you to tell me who I am."

Martha gazed thoughtfully at the fire, over which a haunch of venison was roasting. In doing so, she also gave a covert glance at the white-haired woman who sat bent forward with her face buried in her colorless hands.

"Why do you want to know?" the old woman demanded, turning sharply upon Kit. "Are you not contented as you are? The knowledge of your parentage would likely add but little to your pleasure."

"Nevertheless, it would be greatly to my satisfaction to know."

"Very well; be seated," and the hermitess drew a stool close to his and seated herself.

"As the two stories are connected, I may as well include them both in one," she said, in a guarded tone, evidently intending that only Kit should hear.

"You remember I told you that Paul Vermilye was the servant of a rich Southern gentleman?"

"Yes."

"Well, this gentleman was Morton Miles, then a very young and handsome married man. He had inherited a grand old estate from his father, and married the belle of the city near which he lived. Adjoining his estate was another of no insignificant value, also owned by a young, but unmarried man, named Paul Slensby, who was, by the way, a second cousin of Morton Miles, and a wild, reckless fellow, to boot."

"Yes; I understand."

Kit was beginning to see a glimmer of light on the subject.

"This Paul Slensby was a suitor for the hand of the lady Morton Miles won, and when he found he had lost her, he swore vengeance. He apparently got all over his rage however, for he soon after married a Miss Lennox."

Kit started.

Then, after all, his boyish remembrance of the name was not a fancy!

"By his wife, Paul Slensby had three children. The first one died when but a week old. The second and third ones lived. Upon each child was the singular birth-mark, in the shape of a figure three!"

"Great Scott! Then Paul Slensby is my father?"

"He is. And, next to Paul Vermilye, a more villainous person never existed."

"I kinder think that way myself. But, go on."

"Well, to explain the birth-mark, as near as possible: Shortly before the first child was born, Slensby came home one night, terribly intoxicated, and quarreled with his wife, who was a very peaceable woman. During the quarrel he became very violent, and cried, 'Curse you! curse you! I will kill you!' following which, he struck her three heavy blows on the breast. When their first child was born, it bore the figure three, where he had seized her left arm. It was the same with the second and the third child. You were the third."

"A couple of months before your birth, his brutality became so great, that Mrs. Slensby was forced to leave him, and fly for her life. Her boy she left behind, knowing he would be an incumbrance to her, going out on the merciless world as she was. She finally reached Boston, and there you were born—in the Alms-house."

"When you were six months old you were placed in a foundling asylum, and left there, as your mother could not work and attend to you."

I found her, two years later, and took her into my charge, but no trace of you could ever be found!"

"And, my mother—my mother?" Kit cried, excitedly, the truth dawning upon him. "Is she yonder lady?"

"Yes, Kit—that is your poor, misused mother whom I have watched over all these years. Wait! withhold your eagerness. Jessie! Jessie!"

The silver-haired recluse looked up, quickly, eagerly.

"Come here, Jessie!" old Martha said, in a kindly tone.

Jessie arose and glided toward them, her hands clasped before her, her wildly beautiful eyes and pale face wearing an anxious, expectant expression.

"What is it Martha?" she asked in a tremulous voice. "I was looking back over the sad, sad past."

"You mustn't do it, Jessie. It only makes you miserable. Jessie, dear, Paul Slensby and your eldest son are in Played-Out camp. Would you like to see them?"

A shudder traversed her figure.

"No! no!" she gasped, a look of utter horror coming over her face; "not *him*, anyhow. Oh! no! no!"

"There, now, do not be agitated. He shall not trouble you. I have seen them both, Jessie, and I believe father and son to be alike—of the same nature!"

"Then, I do not want to see either. I could see the father's nature reflected in the face of the child, when he was born. It was not so with my other boy, Martha—he was *my* boy, for all the world. Oh! that merciless fate should have never made it necessary for us to separate—how happy I should now be!"

"Have you any idea that your other son still lives, Jessie?"

"No! I have given up all hope. I have even dreamed of seeing his sweet little face in its coffin."

"Dreams go by contraries, you know, Jessie. Your youngest son still lives!"

"What? Oh! Martha! Why are you so cruel as to try to cheer me up, with a forlorn hope?"

"It is not a forlorn hope. Your son now stands before you!"

Kit had arisen, and stood with glistening eyes, and outstretched arms to receive her.

"Mother, I am your son!" he said.

She uttered a piercing cry, her face became deathly white, and she fell forward in Kit's arms, in a swoon.

He carried her to a bed of skins and laid her gently down.

At first it seemed as if she were dead, but the persistent application of such restoratives as Martha's abode afforded, soon succeeded in restoring her to consciousness.

With her returning senses came literally a new life. She soon regained her reasoning faculties and was no longer dull and melancholy as before.

It was late in the day before Kit left the cavern, and when he did some arrangements were made which the reader will understand further on.

With a newly-found mother and a betrothed wife, Kit felt his cup of happiness was already overflowing.

CHAPTER XIII.

A TERRIBLE TEST.

WHEN the happy-hearted Kit reached Played-Out, he found a note awaiting him in the Olympic Saloon.

It was in an unfamiliar hand, and he opened it with some curiosity.

It proved to be from no one else than Byron Milton, and was couched in the following language:

"MR. KIT BRICKTOP, SIR:—I desire to meet you immediately, with pistols, to decide our respective claims to the hand of Miss Roulere. I have sworn to possess her, and have evidence that you will assert your claims. Two of us cannot have her, and you shall not, if I have to shoot you at the altar. Therefore, the only way to settle it is by an honorable meeting on the field. Yours,

"BYRON MILTON."

Kit went to his office, sat down, read the epistle over a second time, and then indulged in a laugh.

"Well, chaw my nose ef the feller ain't cutting big spurs since he licked Leech," he muttered; "and he's got the cheek to invite me to trim 'em for him. Guess like enuff Mai has let the cat out of the bag and told him to skip. Somehow these pretty females can't keep a close lip. Wonder how I better do?"

He cogitated a few minutes—then seizing a pen, dashed off the following:

"MR. BYRON MILTON SHAKESPEARE SLENSBY,

"*Poet Laureate of Played-Out*:—

"SIR:—Your e-pistol at hand. As my shootin'-irons ain't in good dueling order, and as I am not desirous of increasing my death-roll—having killed my hundred-and-fourth man, several days since, I must respectfully decline your magnanimous invitation. I would say, however, that Barker the groceryman, has received a fresh barrel of tar, and my hostelry affords an excellent supply of geese feathers. So if you don't get out of this town inside of twenty-four hours, you will be treated to a tar and feather serenade as sure as I am yours truly, Kit."

Placing this in an envelope, he sent a boy with it, to hunt up Milton.

"Won't he b'ile, though, and slop over the sides, when he gits that!" Kit chuckled. "An' accordin' to Hoyle, this same snoozer is my beloved brother! Oh! there will be a funeral around here soon. Reckon I better get outside, so as to enjoy the procession."

He first, however, penned the following, and left it at the hotel office, to be given to Morton Miles:

"MORTON MILES, Esq.:—

"To-night, at 2½ A. M., in saloon. Rap three times, at back door. Girl found.

"OLD OXFORD."

On second thought Kit had the message carried up to the Southerner's room.

"I wonder if the old gent will have gumption enough not to play dead into my roval dad's hands," he muttered, as he went out on the piazza, in anticipation of the arrival of the probably furious poet.

Slensby and Mr. Miles were both sitting in the

latter's room, smoking, when the message arrived.

Mr. Miles was looking greatly more cheerful and active than for several days past, much to the annoyance of Slensby.

"Ah! we have news at last," Miles said, glancing at the superscription upon the envelope. "It is from the strange *incognito*."

He opened and perused it, and handed it to Slensby.

"There! what do you think of it?"

"But devilish little," the villain replied, after glancing over it. "If I were you I'd pay no attention to it. It's some trap, and before you get out of it I'll wager you'll get bled of some of your loose cash."

"I'll take the chances. We can never expect to follow up the trail of that villain Vermilye without the papers."

"Well, if you're in for it, of course I'm with you. But look here; it is in the dead of night, when no one is abroad. It won't do for us to be unprepared. I have an idea."

"Well, out with it!"

"You see, I have made the acquaintance of a first-class young fellow named Milton. They say he's a tiger in a fight. If you've no objection, I'll arrange for him to accompany us."

"Oh, I've no objections. Three men are more than two, of course."

"Certainly. This Milton is really a prince of good fellows. By the way, Morton, I made a strange resolution last night on retiring. I got thinking the matter over, and have concluded to make a will. Of course this life is uncertain—one cannot tell at what moment he may drop off. I haven't much, 'tis true; but you know I have a son wandering about the earth somewhere, and it's no more than right he should succeed to what I leave behind."

"Oh, it is a good plan. I always make a new will every year. Slensby, don't you ever feel concerned for the future, on account of the wife you drove away from you years ago?"

"Bah! no. She was as ugly as I was. I dare say she married again, and forgot me. By the way, Morton, I suppose it's none of my business, but you have left all your wealth to your child, should she ever be found?"

"Certainly. If she is not found within five years, everything comes to you as your own, with the proviso that if she should afterward come to light, you or your heirs shall yield her her rights!"

"A very sensible will—very sensible. I should never withhold a penny from the dear child."

"The lion cometh like a thunderation storm, an' he maketh fer ther lamb like a two-forty horse on the home-stretch!"

Thus commented Kit.

He stood upon the piazza smoking a fragrant Havana, when he saw Byron Milton approaching the hotel from the direction of the Roulere cabin at a rapid gait. His every movement seemed to indicate that he was in a violent passion, and Kit smiled thereat, for he knew that a row was imminent.

Milton approached the piazza with the mien of a fierce young bull, and was about the maddest-looking poet that ever stood upon two feet.

"See here!" he cried, striding up to Kit, and shaking his fist in the boy's face. "What did you mean by that insulting reply that you sent to me?"

"Reckon you'll find a Dictionary in my office, if you couldn't make it out!" Kit replied, provokingly.

"I know what you meant. You intended to insult me!"

"Perhaps—possibly—undoubtedly—as you like it!"

"Well, I'm going to serve you as I did that ruffian, Leech, you miserable young whelp!"

"Oh, how amusing," Kit replied, with a smile, which so incensed the poet that he aimed a blow full at the boy's face; but Kit, with a quick, kangaroo-like movement, dodged it, and gave the poet a kick in the stomach that doubled him up like a jack-knife, and caused him to howl with pain.

"Coward! coward!" the dude roared. "No one but a coward would do that. Oh! oh! oh!"

"Don't like it, eh? Served ye right, ye flunkey! That will give ye an inspiration to write a poem entitled 'How a Moon Calf Got Kicked By a Muel.' Ye orter know better than to come foolin' near a nitro-glycerine factory like me. I'm liable ter go off at any minit!" Kit cried, while a crowd gathered, with grins of delight.

"Oh, I'll pay you for this!" Milton roared. "Oh! oh! oh!"

"Better pay yer doctor's bill first," a facetiously inclined miner suggested.

"Or buy a coffin, ef ye fool with a kangaroo," another added.

Milton did not reply, but gradually straightened up, his face white, his eyes gleaming venomously.

"Kit Bricktop, you are a coward!" he hissed, glaring at our hero savagely.

"Waal, not if ther judge knows his own court-house, I ain't," was the smiling response.

"Then, if you are not a coward, meet me like a gentleman, with pistols."

"Like a gentleman I refuse to do anything of the kind. I'll tell you what I will do. Let any one man, disinterested, get a fresh pack of cards from the bar, shuffle them fairly and honestly, so that we can see that there is no trickery, and then deal them out in two piles before us, on the floor of the piazza. To whosoever's lot it falls, to get the ace of hearts, that man shall be elected to do with the other as he chooses, and it shall be considered no crime, nor shall the victim attempt to object. That will decide who the coward is, and settle all matters!"

A murmur of approval passed through the crowd. It was certainly fair enough—as fair for one as for the other, and it heightened Kit measurably in the estimation of those who had heard his remarkable proposition.

A still whiter shade crept over Byron Milton's face as he heard the proposal, to which he knew he could not well refuse assent, without branding himself a coward.

"How are we to know who will give a square shuffle and deal?" he growled, biting at the ends of his mustache.

"We have each an equal chance to watch, and

would be likely to squeal, I fancy, should either of us detect any trickery."

"I will give you each a fair shuffle, gents!" a stranger said, stepping up. "I know neither of you, having just arrived from the East—therefore you may know it matters not to me which of you gets the prize."

Both Kit and Milton surveyed him a moment sharply, and then Milton said:

"Bring out the pasteboards; it's got to be settled somehow."

"Fred, a fresh deck, please!" Kit ordered, addressing the bartender.

The cards were brought forth in their sealed wrappers, and given to the stranger, who had thrown off his coat and rolled up his sleeves, evidently to carry the impression that he had no intention to cheat.

"Now, gents, I will shuffle them slowly, fairly and thoroughly, you see, so that you can readily perceive that I am as fair for one as the other. Therel! Are you satisfied that they are fairly and rightly shuffled?"

"I am," Kit answered.

"The same," Milton nodded.

"Then, watch. I will throw them on the floor in two piles—one to each man. Here they go!"

One by one he began to deal them.

It was a moment of suspense.

Every man held his breath, and those who couldn't get a view listened eagerly for the verdict.

Forty-four cards lay upon the piazza.

Forty-five.

"It's getting rather close, I'll swear, the stranger said, flinging the forty-sixth card to Kit. "There must surely be an ace of hearts in the pack, or it's no go!"

Kit stood with folded arms, looking over the crowd, a shade paler himself, while Byron Milton perceptibly trembled, as though he anticipated what the result would be.

"Forty-eight!" fell to Kit.

"Forty-nine, sir!"—to Milton.

"Fifty! Ah! we have it!"

And the ace of hearts fluttered to the floor at the feet of the boy.

Something like a groan escaped from the poet's lips, as his gaze fell upon the card.

"Go on! do the business!" he gasped, drawing his form erect, and clasping his hands behind his back; but Kit sat down upon a stool and looked at the victim with a snort of laughter.

"You durned fool!" he said. "D'ye s'pose I'd hurt you?"

"And why not?" Milton cried, an expression of relief crossing his face.

"Why not? Well, sir, jest fer ther simple reason that your daddy and mammy war *my* daddy and mammy, after they war your daddy and mammy. That's the how of it."

"What! you *my* brother?"

"I am disgusted to say I am, and now, my dear brother, let me give ye a straight pointer. I'll spare your life now, but if you aire seen in this camp after sunset, the boys heer will tar an' feather you. Eh, fellers?"

"Hooray! you bet!" a score of voices shouted in a chorus. "We'll fix him!"

"You hear!" Kit continued. "Now, ef you've

got any respect fer yer person, you'll git up and dust!"

And Milton did "get up and dust" without any ceremony, evidently glad to escape so easily.

Within an hour afterwards, however, he managed to sneak into the hotel, and up to his father's room, fancying no one saw him, but the lynx-eyes of Kit were not idle about that time.

CHAPTER XIV.

THE RACKET CLOSES WITH A HURRAH.

ABOUT an hour after dark Kit sauntered down toward the Roulere cabin. Everything was working to his liking, and he calculated it would not be many days before he should have to prepare for his wedding-tour.

He was nearing the cabin, when he fancied he saw a skulking figure. Instantly dropping flat upon the ground behind a sage bush and using it as a shield, he could see without being seen.

Two men were skulking about the cabin. Presently he heard a rap at the door, and it was opened, letting out a flood of light. Instantly the two bounded into the cabin, and Kit heard a scream—Mai's voice, too!

"Here's a scrap!" Kit muttered. "Two men after Mai, eh? Guess I'll have to have a say in that."

He leaped toward the cabin; and, as he did so, a man sprung out, bearing Mai in his arms.

"Halt, or you're a dead man!" Kit yelled, giving chase to Mai's captor. "I know you, Leech, and you've undertaken the wrong job this time!"

With a yell of rage Leech darted away and disappeared, leaving Mai behind him.

"Are you hurt, Mai?" Kit cried, running up to her.

"Not a bit. Is it you, dear Kit?—I am so glad," and she arose to her feet. "Oh! but I was scared."

"Who was the other one?"

"Big Blacksnake!"

"I guessed as much. Let's go back and see if I killed him."

But, as they failed to find him, Mr. Blacksnake evidently was not killed. He had crawled away and escaped and was never seen again in Played-Out, which was about the wisest course he could have pursued, seeing that when the outrage became known the big brute's neck surely would have been circumscribed with a halter.

It was two A. M.

The main street, and in fact the only street of Played-Out, was wrapped in gloom. Not even a shanty, cabin or tent displayed a light, nor could any one be seen abroad, when three men left La Belle Hotel by the front entrance, and stole through an alley to the rear of the Olympic Saloon.

They were Mr. Miles, Paul Slensby, and his son, Milton.

"Be on your guard, now!" Slensby warned. "We don't know what sort of a trap we are walking into."

Mr. Miles rapped upon the door three times, and it opened.

"Come in!" a voice ordered. "Walk right through into the saloon, where there is a light."

They entered, and the speaker followed them. He was masked, and wore a heavy cloak.

"Be seated, gentlemen," he said. "Mr. Miles, I suppose you want your papers?"

"I do, sir," Miles replied.

"And your long-lost daughter?"

"I do, sir!"

The masked man touched a silver call-bell upon a table. Immediately a door opened, which communicated with the hotel, and Mai Loulere sprung into the room, immediately followed by over a score of persons, two of whom were women, and all of whom were masked.

"The jig's up!" Milton cried, "so let's make a break, father!"

"Hold!" Kit cried, at the same time tearing off his mask and cloak. "The jig isn't altogether up for you two scoundrels. Mr. Morton Miles, here is your daughter, known as Mai Roulere. Yonder rascal, Paul Slensby—who, mind you, is my own *father*—has evidently known of her whereabouts for some months, for he sent my brother there on to Played-Out to court the girl, and marry her if possible! This was a conspiracy to come into possession of your estate!"

Mr. Miles received his pretty daughter into his open arms, and after embracing her, turned to Slensby.

"Paul, I never thought this of you!" he said, reproachfully.

"Probably not," Slensby retorted, now thoroughly trapped and exposed. "I never calculated you'd find it out. I played for gain, and lost. Luck is against me, and that's all there is of it. I suppose I might as well edify you"—with a brutal laugh—"by explaining to you that I hired Paul Vermilye to steal your child, expecting you to offer a fabulous price for her return. The cuss outwitted me for a time, but I finally traced and found him. But for that cursed boy, who announces himself as of my blood, I'd have accomplished my purpose."

"Monster! dare you curse *my* son?"

It was Jessie Slensby who spoke, as she stepped forward and threw off her mask. "Oh! Paul Slensby, you will repent when it is too late!"

The villain reeled back when he saw her, and covered his face with his hands.

When he looked again Mr. Miles and all three of the ladies were gone.

"Ah! what! was it her ghost?" he gasped glaring about wildly.

"No! inhuman father, it was your wife and my mother—spared to have her life brightened by an honorable and loving son. Men, do your work!" Kit ordered, sternly.

Fifteen masked men stepped forward, with drawn revolvers, and confronted the two cowering wretches.

"Villains!" the spokesman of the party cried. "It is our mandate since we have learned who you are, and what you are, to tar and feather you both, and ride you out of camp on a rail. If you raise an objection we will shoot you full of holes. If you ever return here the same fate awaits you!"

They were then seized, and dragged out of

doors, when the clothes were stripped from their backs and bodies, and both were tarred and feathered in the most approved style, then, mounted upon scantlings, borne on miners' shoulders, they were ridden out of Played-Out with rifles leveled to keep them aboard."

And on the night air arose the suggestive poem, chanted by a chorus of rough voices:

"It's nice to be a miner,
An' brave to pick a trail.
But 'tis nicest thing of all, tho',
To go riding on a rail!"

Lawton Leech was never seen again in Played-Out.

Paul Vermilye was found murdered, a week or two after the eventful night in the Olympic, and near him, also dead, was young Mancill!

The debt of vengeance had been paid!

Kit and Mai were soon after married, and began their new existence under the most favorable auspices.

Mr. Miles returned to the South, old Martha accompanying him, but Kit's mother remained behind to share his home and fondest love.

But alas! even the shadow of a great sorrow was there! When the lives of Kit and Mai seemed laden with quiet happiness, there came a blow that, unexpected, caused genuine grief to more than one in Played-Out camp!

THE END.

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